

Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

2

New Game+

START?

▶ Yes No

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+

new game



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Prologue: Just Your Everyday First Love

There wasn't a special reason for it or anything. I just fell for him gradually. My feelings grew little by little over time.

The kindness behind his words and actions warmed my heart. I thought it was cool how he could do anything and everything with flair. And yet he lacked self-confidence and had a timid nature, which I found cute. My eyes would inadvertently seek him out during class, and I discovered things: he frequently dozed off during lessons, and he was a talented pen spinner. I found all of these little quirks to be charming. Before I knew it, I'd feel elated just being by his side, and my heart would pound quickly.

Oh, I must be in love with him. The realization had hit me recently, and now I was aware of my feelings.

A tiny flicker had fed on the firewood and turned into a giant pyre of passion that blazed brightly. But I knew Natsu's heart would never be mine. Yet even though I knew it wouldn't happen, I was happy to just spend time together.

When I learned that Natsu had reinvented his appearance and personality for his high school debut, I finally understood why there was a gap in his personality. I'd always felt like Natsu was hiding parts of himself from us and wondered why. Not to say that discovering his secret made my love for him disappear. It actually felt easier to learn and grow closer to him because he was showing us his true self. The feelings residing within my heart only grew faster.

What had really surprised me was learning that Tatsu had feelings for me. He'd never acted like he was in love with me; we always bickered, after all... But when the rest of us eavesdropped on Tatsu and Natsu's rooftop conversation, my impression of Tatsu changed once I found out the reason he'd been avoiding us. Tatsu showed that he had an unexpectedly sensitive side.

I couldn't believe that I'd been the cause of this uproar... Tatsu loved me, and he was jealous at seeing Natsu and I hitting it off. How could I have predicted that'd happen?

Tatsu told me he wouldn't give up on me...but I'm sorry. I do love Tatsu—but only as a friend. My heart doesn't pound when we're together. As it turned out, the one I fell for was Natsu. He was my first love.

However, I suspected Natsu's heart already belonged to someone else. So everything would be solved, and everyone would be happy, if I fell for Tatsu instead. I knew that, but I couldn't control my emotions.

I've been searching high and low for a way to rid myself of these feelings.

Chapter 1: Let's Raise Their Love Meters!

The mild May weather invited drowsiness during class. The refreshing breeze that blew in from the windows was pleasant. I'd been nodding off until the wind suddenly flipped the pages of the textbook in my hand, returning me to reality.

I looked up at the chalkboard. Murakami-sensei, our math teacher, was up on the teacher's podium writing out an expanded quadratic formula. He was giving an earnest explanation, but when I looked around the room, many students were dozing off just like I had been. *Murakami-sensei's voice is low and pleasing to the ear. It has the power to lull us students to sleep.*

Right after school had started in April, all the students had diligently paid attention in class, but as the end of May neared, we'd become accustomed to high school life and relaxed. *Well, to be fair, we did finish our midterms recently.*

Murakami-sensei glanced at all the sleeping students and then at the wall clock on the side of the classroom. "All right. Let's end here today. Finish the rest for homework, and be sure to do it properly." The bell rang right as he said that, signaling the end of class.

A punctual devil as always! I smiled dryly as I remembered how Murakami-sensei always seemed to have impeccable timing, even back during my first round of high school.

Math was our sixth period. All we had left was cleanup and homeroom before we'd be free for the day. For cleaning duty, our class was divided into groups of around six people based on our student numbers, which were sorted alphabetically. My surname was Haibara, so I was in the same group as Hoshimiya, which made me look forward to cleaning time—just a bit.

"All righty! Let's do this!" Hoshimiya said as she came up to my side, instantly cheering me up.

She looks energetic today as usual. Well, I did spot her snoozing in class, but she's cute when she's asleep, so who cares, right?

“What area are we in charge of this week, again?” I asked. Our cleaning tasks rotated weekly. Today was Monday, so it was time for a new assignment.

“Umm...” Hoshimiya’s eyes shifted around. I could almost see them swirling. “What *was* it, again?”

“Where were you planning on going if you didn’t know?” I asked, teasing her.

Hoshimiya’s cheeks puffed up. “Grr... Natsuki-kun, I feel like you’ve been bullying me a lot more lately!”

“Huh? That’s not true,” I denied, but I had an idea of what she meant. *It’s because your reactions are just too good.*

“You’re not allowed to bully people with sound logic!” she complained.

“Okay, okay,” I said with a shrug.

I started walking towards our assigned location for the week: the west stairwell. Hoshimiya walked with me and we chatted about random topics.

Along the way, our fellow cleaning group member Hino Satoya joined up with us. “What a pain! Let’s hurry up and get this over with...” he said while walking listlessly with his hands laced behind his head. His hair was dyed brown, and the word “flippant” described him well.

“Yeah! Let’s work hard!” Hoshimiya exclaimed and balled her hands into fists close to her chest.

Hino stared unmoving at her gesture and smirked. “Hoshimiya-chan, you’re so serious.”

“You think so?” she questioned.

“Yeah, I’ve never seen anyone who works so hard at school cleaning,” he replied.

“Really? That’s no good. Natsuki-kun, you think we should give it our all, right?” she asked me.

After a beat, I stiffly responded, “Hm? Oh yeah, of course. Isn’t it obvious that we need to work hard?”

“You traitor.” Hino’s disgusted expression felt like a stab to my conscience.

Sorry, Hino. I'm earning affection points with Hoshimiya through small conversations like this!

"I can always count on you, Natsuki-kun!" she said, pleased.

Oh boy, I do feel a little guilty when Hoshimiya believes in me with such a pure heart.

Hino wrapped his arm around my neck and whispered something to me so that Hoshimiya couldn't hear. "Hey, man! It's not right to just make yourself look good."

We'd started talking to each other recently, but I still felt like Hino was overly friendly. *Extroverts work on a different friendliness spectrum, though, and I guess it's not to the point of being uncomfortable. Still, I'm not a fan.*

That wasn't limited to Hino either. Recently, I'd been interacting with students outside of my usual friend group. I'd exchanged words with my classmates before, but these days it felt like everyone in our class was gradually getting closer.

No one had reached out to me during the first week of school, but now people often spoke to me just like Hino was doing. Probably it was because of the recent change in my social position, appearance, and general vibes.

"You and Haibara-kun are cut from two different cloths," Hino warned Hoshimiya. "You might as well be asking a brick wall."

Suddenly, Fujiwara Kanata grabbed Hino by the collar and pulled him off of me. Fujiwara was like the leader of the girls in our class and got along with everyone. She had a tendency to look after all of us, so the others called her "mom." *I can see why everyone calls her that. She's going out of her way to stand up for me even when we aren't particularly close—I really feel like I'm being protected by a mother hen.*

"What's wrong?" Hoshimiya asked, tilting her head to the side.

Fujiwara patted her on the head. "Nothing you need to worry about, Hikari-chan."

"What is this?! Kanata-chan, even *you've* started acting like Yuino-chan

lately,” Hoshimiya complained, displeased that everyone had taken to treating her like a child.

Nanase’s overprotective nature has infected everyone, I thought.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” Fujiwara lightly clapped twice to catch our attention. “Come on, let’s start cleaning!”

Fujiwara’s used to taking the lead, huh? It helps that she’s overflowing with confidence. It gives her this air of authority that naturally makes people want to follow her, I mentally noted. She’s a different sort of popular kid than Hoshimiya and the others. Reita has a similar leader type of disposition, but he’s got a gentle air to him, whereas Fujiwara has more of a cold and businesslike attitude that’s kinda scary. She’s nice to the girls though.

“Psst, hey, Natsuki-kun,” Hoshimiya whispered to me as she swept the hallway with a broom.

I guess Hoshimiya doesn’t want to get scolded by Fujiwara for speaking too loud. I don’t really get why she thinks she has to whisper, but it is cute, so heck yeah!

“Did you finish reading the novel I lent you?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m almost done with it. I’ve got around twenty pages left,” I replied.

I was on the second phase of my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan: getting a girlfriend. If I wanted to date Hoshimiya, what better way to get closer to her than through our shared hobbies? Hoshimiya was in the literature club and loved reading, so I figured I could score some points by giving her my opinions on the books she liked. Recently, I’d been borrowing books from her collection that she’d recommended to me. *Regardless, I simply enjoy reading.*

“You’re nearing the conclusion! Isn’t that part just so enthralling?!”

“Yeah, it is. The story moves fast, and things keep happening. I have no idea who the criminal is.”

“Heh heh heh, I know, right?! Shall I tell you who the culprit is?”

“That’s the worst kind of spoiler!” I exclaimed. “Could you not?!” I’d caught myself almost nodding along reflexively because of how casually she’d offered.

Hoshimiya giggled gleefully at my surprise. “They announced a movie adaptation of the book!”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen it before,” I said. *Crap! Slip of the tongue.*

Hoshimiya tilted her head and stared at me quizzically. “You’ve seen it?”

“Uh, yeah, the movie adaptation announcement, right?” I added hastily.

I’ve actually seen the movie itself, I thought. But it was so long ago that I’ve forgotten what happens. If I remember correctly, the movie’s coming out in a week or so. I had faint recollections of it being quite good. Suddenly a realization came to me. *So this is why I felt déjà vu while I was reading the novel!* Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, I still couldn’t remember who the culprit was. To be fair, I had technically watched the movie seven years ago.

“Oh, that’s what you meant. There are a lot of posters up around the station! Also, a huge star—Hayano-kun—will be playing Harma-kun, our protagonist! He’s so handsome!” she gushed.

Looks like I managed to trick her. I listened to Hoshimiya happily chatter about the news, the words flying out of her mouth like a hail of bullets. Her eyes twinkled brightly.

I see, she’s into guys like Hayano-kun... Let’s be real, the difference between his looks and mine are like night and day. It doesn’t matter how hard I work, I’m never going to be as handsome as him.

“The heroine, Merya-chan, is being played by Hirono Suzuka, right?” I recalled that fact from my dim recollection of past events.

Hoshimiya nodded enthusiastically. “Yes! I can’t wait to see her on-screen with Hayano-kun. They suit each other so well! Didn’t they just costar in another movie? Those two have been portraying lovers a lot lately!”

Really? To be honest, I didn’t watch much TV, so I was pretty clueless when it came to news about actors or actresses. I wasn’t interested in any aspect of a movie except for the story itself. I was also the type of otaku who watched a ton of anime but knew nothing at all about the voice actors.

“Oh, is that so? I didn’t know that,” I said. I’d recently learned that it was

better to admit my ignorance and encourage Hoshimiya's ramblings about a topic rather than pretend like I'd known about it beforehand. Hoshimiya had otakuesque tendencies and actually wanted to talk to someone about her hobbies.

"Uh-huh! Erm, the recent movie was called *A Love Song For You*. It's pretty famous. The leading actor..." Hoshimiya began to ramble again.

I listened to the ecstatic Hoshimiya while giving an occasional nod or response to show her that I was paying attention. I tried to keep my reactions wholehearted but also not so over-the-top that I interrupted her flow. I'd learned from the internet that being a good listener is key to becoming popular!

In all honesty, I do enjoy listening to Hoshimiya talk like this. She's passionate, gives her all to describe things to me, and she's really expressive—she's just so cute! It's very like her to not have a direction to her chatter either.

But unfortunately, Fujiwara ended our fun conversation. "Hey, get back to cleaning!" She sniffed and then muttered, "Sheesh."

Flustered, Hoshimiya began cleaning at twice the speed. "S-Sorry! I'm doing my best now!"

Curse you! How dare you interrupt our flirting! I kept my gripes to myself, though, since Fujiwara had technically been right to reprimand us. Feeling bad about getting Hoshimiya in trouble, I gripped the broom and swept, but I didn't think I was helping much, honestly.

"Haibara-kuuun! Didn't I tell you to put your back into it too?" Fujiwara's sharp gaze bore a hole through me. She'd easily spotted that I was cleaning as if I had little stake in the task.

"What? No, look, I'm working pretty hard!" I protested.

"Aren't you the one who beguiled Hikari in the first place?" Fujiwara glared and brought her face close to mine.

Stop it! I'm more nervous than scared now! Plus, something smells nice!

"B-Beguiled? C-Come on, who do you think I am?" I fumbled out a response as I leaned away from her.

Hino, who was—believe it or not—cleaning diligently off to one side, remarked with a smirk, “Serves you right!”

“Y-Yeah! I wasn’t beguiled or anything!” Hoshimiya insisted.

Fujiwara and Hino exchanged looks and then shrugged. Right then, we heard footsteps from down the hallway bustling in our direction.

“Heyooo! We finished cleaning!” Uta shouted energetically, waving her hands wildly in the air.

Walking next to her was Reita. Their surnames were close alphabetically, with Uta’s Sakura and Reita’s Shiratori, so they were in the same cleaning group. Since we’re on the topic, both Tatsuya and Nanase were also in a group together.

“We’re almost done here too,” Fujiwara replied. I glanced behind me to see that Hoshimiya was taking a break now that she’d finally finished cleaning her designated area. Uta leaped onto Hoshimiya’s back without hesitation.

“HRAAAH!” Uta cried.

“Eek!!! U-Uta-chan?! Don’t surprise me like that!”

Uta nodded smugly, pleased with Hoshimiya’s reaction. *These two have been closer than ever lately. Well, it’s quite helpful to me since seeing skinship between girls is good for the eyes.*

“Natsuki, do you have work today?” Reita asked me while I was staring at the two girls messing around.

“Um, yeah, I do. I’m on shift from six to ten today,” I replied. *If memory serves, Nanase is working the same shift, which I’m very grateful for. I feel comfortable when she’s around. She’s a good listener and a calm person, so I don’t get swept up in any weird hyper energy. Nanase’s like a healing ray of sunlight for a natural introvert like me.*

“Do you have practice today, Reita?” I asked.

“Of course. Inter-high qualifiers are approaching, so practice has been getting intense.”

“Nice! How are you feeling about it?”

“Pretty good. I’m working hard so I can be a starter.”

You’re only a first-year, but you’re already in contention to be a starter? Reita, you’re impressive as always! He was on a different level compared to someone like me who’d been a benchwarmer for three whole years.

Reita and I continued to chat idly all the way back to our classroom. When we got there, we saw Nanase and Tatsuya standing next to each other by the window. They looked like they were discussing something.

Even though they’re in the same cleaning group, I rarely see those two talking alone because their personalities are complete opposites. I wonder what they’re talking about?

Clearly wondering the same thing I was, Uta walked up to them and took the initiative to ask, “Whatcha guys talkin’ about?”

“Hello, Uta. Do you want to know?” Nanase asked with a smile.

But Tatsuya stepped in before she could say anything. “Hey, stop it.”

She laughed. “He doesn’t want me to say, so I’ll refrain from divulging.”

Compared to Nanase with her teasing smile, Tatsuya looked terribly uncomfortable.

I had a good idea of what they’d been talking about. The subject was almost always Uta-related whenever Tatsuya looked uncomfortable these days. He’d had his crush on Uta revealed to the whole group, after all. *Despite what you’d think based on her appearance, Nanase enjoys teasing people, so she was probably pestering Tatsuya with questions and just generally toying with him.*

Uta tilted her head, puzzled by their response. She looked at Tatsuya and then a small, “Oh,” escaped from her lips as she flushed red.

Tatsuya looked away from Uta and awkwardly scratched his head. Nanase and Reita were smirking off to the side as they watched the two’s reactions. *Wow, what great personalities you guys have...* I thought sarcastically.

Well, teasing them in moderation is likely less awkward than letting it become a forbidden topic. Reita and Nanase probably won’t make a misplay and ruin the delicate balance of the situation, I reasoned. *And wow, it’s already been two*

weeks since the rooftop debacle!

Uta and Tatsuya had been extremely awkward around each other since that little truth had leaked, but recently the mood between them was slowly returning to normal. *I bet they feel awkward whenever they get teased like this, though.*

It did feel like our whole friend group had become more close-knit as a result of the incident. *It's a blessing in disguise, or all's well that ends well, or whatever it is people say... Also, I don't need to be overly cautious all the time anymore since now everyone knows that I was a gloomy guy in middle school.*

But of course, that didn't mean I was going to revert to my original self. *It's hard to be perfect, but I'll keep putting effort into changing,* I thought. *If I want to become the main character of my own rainbow-colored youth, I need to be cooler than my past self every day.*

"Haibara-kun, you're working today too, right?" Nanase suddenly asked me, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"H-Huh? Oh, yeah," I said.

"Do you want to go together, then?"

"Sure."

Nanase's mellow tone had caused me to inadvertently agree. Not that it was an issue, though. She and I had become quite friendly lately thanks to working together. I no longer felt nervous talking to her when it was just the two of us, and our conversations didn't peter out awkwardly.

And whenever the conversation veered towards idols, Nanase could go on forever. That side of her really had the otaku spirit, similar to Hoshimiya. But unlike Hoshimiya, Nanase's expression didn't change much when she talked about idols, so it was hard for me to discern how zealous she really was about the topic. However, I was starting to get a better read on her emotions lately.

"Nanase, you look like you're in a good mood today," I commented.

"Oh dear, you can tell? My oshi's new CD was released today," Nanase said happily.

While we talked, I felt someone watching me. I turned in the direction of the gaze and saw that Uta was staring up at me absentmindedly.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

It took Uta a moment to realize I was talking to her. “Huh? Oh, no, nothing’s up! Uh, I need to use the bathroom!” She zoomed out of the classroom as if she were fleeing the scene of a crime.

She was just staring a hole into me. Did she want to say something? I wondered. I’ve been getting along great with Nanase and Hoshimiya recently, but my conversations with Uta keep flopping like this. But isn’t that because Uta keeps running away without explanation?

“Ha ha. Uta’s so cute,” Nanase whispered into my ear.

Even I knew what she was implying; Uta probably had a crush on me. When you boiled it down, the Tatsuya incident had basically only happened because he’d picked up on her feelings for me.

I hesitated. “Yeah, she is.”

No one had said it out loud, but we all had the same hunch. Nanase and Reita are sharp, after all. Hoshimiya might not have picked up on it yet, though. And it looks like Uta’s realized that I’ve put two and two together, so she’s embarrassed.

“What are you going to do about it?” Nanase asked.

I had no idea how to respond. What am I supposed to do here? I love Hoshimiya! Everything I do is because I want to date her. So I can’t accept Uta’s feelings. I’d have to reject her if she confessed to me...but it’s not like she really has confessed—I just so happened to pick up on her feelings. There’s nothing I can do for Uta right now. And what if I’m actually just being overly self-conscious about all this?

Noticing my lost expression, Nanase apologized. “Sorry, that was an odd thing to ask.”

We had to cut our conversation there because our homeroom teacher entered the classroom.

After school, Nanase and I went to our workplace, Café Mares, together. We didn't talk much on our way there, but thankfully, I didn't find silence awkward when I was alone with her. *I guess I'm used to it because we don't chat much during work.*

Once we started our shift, I was fully occupied with working and had no time to think about anything else.

At last, I murmured, "Phew... I'm beat." Two hours had flown by before I even knew it. I wiped my sweat off with a towel and took a breather. The sun had set, and the wind felt too cold now, so I closed the window.

"Haibara-kun, here," Nanase said and passed me a tray.

"Okay, boss." I took the tray from her and began washing it. It was 8 p.m., and the flood of customers had slowed down to a trickle. Nanase was drinking some water while she took a break.

The only customer left was drinking coffee while reading a novel. We would probably have little to do for the rest of the evening once I finished washing dishes.

"Haibara-kun, you seem to be in a good mood," Nanase said.

I nodded. *Is it that easy to tell? I am in a great mood! My favorite time to be in Café Mares is right around now when there aren't many customers. It feels like time is passing at a nice leisurely pace, and it's great to tune into the store's jazz music when it's playing at a volume like this that's juuust right.* I relished in the comfortably soft background music. Nanase had mentioned to me that our manager was a fan of jazz.

Nanase murmured, "Waltz For Debby."

"Huh?" I cocked my head to the side.

"It's a famous jazz piano song," she answered while pointing at the speakers near the ceiling.

Oh, it's the song that's playing right now. "Do you know a lot about jazz?" I asked her.

“Not as much as the manager does. My specialty is classical music.”

Oh right, Nanase studies piano. I recalled her mentioning as much when the six of us had been walking around the club fair together. “When did you start playing piano?”

“I started when I was three years old. I’ve been playing it for as long as I can remember. My parents both love music and work in the industry. We even have a grand piano at home,” Nanase said. Her expression looked gentler than usual.

“I want to hear you play sometime,” I said.

She giggled. “I’m not particularly skilled,” Nanase said humbly, but she appeared to be brimming with confidence.

I imagine she’s probably super skilled. Nanase can already do anything as is, but she’s been taking music lessons since she was three? And she’s continued for this long? She’s gotta be anything but bad!

“Haibara-kun, do you like music?” she asked.

“Of course. But I only ever listen to rock.” Stories and music were the two things that had supported me during the gray, dreary days of my youth.

Reading stories had saved me from the despair of reality; music had provided me with empathy and solace when I was alone. If I hadn’t had either one, I wouldn’t have found any joy in existing. Instead of regretting my youth, I’d have died with regrets about my whole life.

“Rock, huh? ...That’s right, you sang a lot of rock songs during karaoke.”

Nanase’s words sent me down memory lane. I reminisced about what had happened after our midterms. *We all went and did karaoke together, and Uta and I sang a lot of rock songs from so many different bands.*

“Yeah, Uta kept inputting songs nonstop,” I said. It had surprised me how similar our taste in music was. We were both so excited about meeting a fellow rock enjoyer that we’d gotten carried away and become extremely excited.

“The two of you have a lot in common,” Nanase said.

If I think about it with a clear mind, I wouldn’t be surprised if Uta and I looked like a pair of lovebirds during karaoke. Aw, man, that’s so embarrassing! Way

too late to realize that now, though.

Nanase giggled. “Uta was so adorable then. Her eyes sparkled when she looked at you.” She rested her elbows on the counter.

“That’s not true,” I denied.

“Oh? Surely you’re aware by now?” She continued her attack.

Perhaps it was because we were on closer terms thanks to working together, or maybe it was because she knew my weakness—that I’d been the class downer in the past—but Nanase had been pulling out all the stops lately. She’d been picking on me ruthlessly.

“Aaah! Shut up!” I didn’t know what to say, so I tried to dodge the topic instead.

Nanase smiled like a flower in full bloom. It was a childish smile which contrasted with her usual placid character. *The gap! It’s overwhelmingly destructive, dammit! You think I’ll forgive you just because you’re cute?! But I do stan this girl, for real.*

Right when I was on the verge of becoming an idol otaku, the door chimed. Nanase and I immediately stopped chatting and went back to work mode.

“Welco—” I stopped halfway through my automatic greeting. A high school girl in uniform had just walked into the store. She was someone I knew very well.

“Heyyy! Just dropping by!” she said cheerfully.

It was Motomiya Miori, my childhood friend who had somehow attended the same school as me since our elementary days. *Don’t say things that make it sound like you’re my girlfriend visiting me at work!* I thought. However, Miori was the type of person to twist my words and hold things over my head for life, so I refrained from saying anything.



“What do you want?” I asked her bluntly.

“I didn’t say I came to see you,” she said with a sniff.

Fair enough, I thought.

Nanase took advantage of the brief pause in our conversation to interject. With her best customer service smile and voice, she said, “Please follow me to your seat,” leading Miori away.

Noticing Nanase’s presence, Miori turned to greet her. “Oh, Yuino-chan! Thanks a bunch!”

“Not at all,” Nanase replied. “Is there something special happening today? It’s quite late for you to be out.” She switched to a casual tone in response to Miori’s friendly attitude.

Nanase’s flawless when it comes to reading between the lines, I marveled. *It’s the key to how she has so many friends in spite of her cool demeanor.*

“Practice wrapped up for the day, and I wanted to have a strategy meeting with that guy over there,” Miori said with a smile pasted on her face as she pointed at me.

It’s not polite to point at people! Also, what the heck?! So you did come to talk to me! You always refuse to be honest or to agree with me, just like when we were kids.

“Strategy meeting?” Nanase asked, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

“It’s nothing much. You two are almost done working, right?” Miori asked.

“Yes. We get off at ten,” Nanase said as she looked at the clock. It was already 9:30 p.m.

“We can’t stay here past ten. Our manager will get mad,” I told Miori.

This part of being a high schooler was inconvenient. I used to work late into the night when I was a college student, but we could only work until 10 p.m. due to the law. *Ah well, what’s a student to do about it?*

“Really? Then let’s go home together,” Miori suggested with ease.

I paused and then grudgingly said, “Well, sure. Fine, I guess.”

She must really want to have a strategy meeting. Did she make any progress with Reita?

“I can stay here until you clock out, right? Oh, I’ll have a coffee!” Miori decided without waiting for my opinion and settled down in her seat.

Pushy as always, and that’s why you’re the brat commander. There were few customers remaining, but I was still working, so I couldn’t continue talking to Miori. I left her and returned to the area behind the counter.

Nanase followed me and commented, “You two are very close.”

“Well, more or less, I guess. We’ve gone to the same school since elementary school,” I explained.

I say that, but before my time leap, Miori and I weren’t originally close enough for her to randomly drop by my workplace. We’re just bound by a pact to help each other out. She said it was for a strategy meeting, so all we’ll be discussing is that, I thought.

My throat was dry, so I took a sip of water. Right as I did so, Nanase asked in an impassive tone, “Are you two dating?”

“BFFUH?!” I exclaimed, almost doing a spit take. I barely managed to force the water back down before any could escape. *Boy, that was close! Where the hell did that come from, Nanase?!* “N-No way!” I denied fervently.

“Really? She came all the way here after practice to see you, she’s waiting for you to finish working, and she wants to walk home with you. Objectively speaking, you two look like a couple.” Nanase looked over at Miori who was blissfully fiddling with her phone. “Also, a strategy meeting? Whatever for?”

“W-Well, uh... Yeah, you know,” I mumbled.

“Will you enlighten me about what you two are planning?”

“U-Uuuh...” I fumbled for words. The deal between me and Miori was that in exchange for helping her date Reita, she’d help me with my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan.

Nanase already knew about my high school debut, so it was probably fine to divulge my side of the deal, but I’d have to tell her that Miori was gunning for

Reita. *I doubt Miori would care if Nanase found out, but this isn't the sort of thing I should talk about without her consent.* I agonized over how I might clear up this misunderstanding without exposing Miori's secret.

Nanase shook her head. "I'm sorry. You don't have to talk about it if you're uncomfortable."

"It's not that I'm uncomfortable, but..." I trailed off.

"I think I've got a good idea, based on your response. I'll ask Miori-san directly next time."

"Sorry, please do that instead," I said gratefully. "Hold on, are you two close?"

The two of them had bumped into each other while the club fair was going on and during our study group session. I'd seen Miori talk to the others before, but I couldn't recall a single time she and Nanase had exchanged words.

"Not particularly, but she's in the same club as Uta, so we're already on pretty good terms, right? A friend of a friend is basically already my friend too."

Ah, the logic of a popular kid... Are you serious? I'm not gonna lie, but I've been low-key assuming that Nanase leaned towards my side of the introversion scale... In my opinion, a friend of a friend is a stranger. But hold on! I've barely ever met any of my friends' friends. Oh wait, I didn't have any friends. Ha ha ha! This is where I'm supposed to laugh, right? I thought sardonically. *It's all about communication skills in the end—which I'm sorely lacking.*

There hadn't been a hint of discomfort in Nanase and Miori's conversation just now. They both maintained the appropriate amount of familiarity and spoke without hesitation. *If I ever tried to speak to a friend of a friend, there's no doubt that I'd make things awkward. I'd waffle on whether or not I should say hello to them at school and end up averting my eyes to avoid the situation, for sure!*

Nanase interrupted my stupid thoughts. "I want to become good friends with Miori-san. She's cute... Plus, she has excellent features. Very nice!" She nodded in agreement with herself as she looked in Miori's direction.

"Yeah, she's great if you just look at her," I said.

“That’s the most important part. Beautiful women are the best.”

“N-Nanase?” I said, bewildered by her tone. *Is it just me or has her personality gone rogue?*

Nanase let out a small gasp. “O-Oh, i-it was just a joke. I’ve only spoken to her a few times, but I think she has a delightful personality. Yes, yes, of course she does! That’s why I want to be friends with her. I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

“O-Oh, really?”

I really want to believe that the alarming vibes you were exuding were just my imagination. I’ve never heard you speak so quickly either... I feel like every now and then, Nanase accidentally reveals some of her inner self, probably because we’ve been getting along well. I want to brush it off as my imagination playing tricks on me, so please keep a tighter rein on your thoughts and hide it better!

After I finished my shift, Miori and I exited the café together. Nanase had left ahead of us without delay, likely out of consideration for the two of us.

The sky was completely dark, but we were right in front of a station, so there were many street lights dimly illuminating the main road. The streets were mostly empty, with few people walking around. We passed by an occasional drunk middle-aged man or a weary-looking salaryman. It was already past 10 p.m., after all.

“I’m happy to have a strategy meeting, but why so late at night?” I asked Miori.

“Because I basically have practice every day. And we’re in different classes, so we barely get the chance to talk. When else are we supposed to discuss the plan? Today was perfect since you had work.”

“I get that you have practice, but until this late? Do you guys really go *this* hard?”

“Uta and I got wrapped up in a conversation afterwards, and now here I am.”

“Shouldn’t you watch the time more carefully? You are a girl, more or less.

Aren't you nervous about walking around at night?"

"What do you mean 'more or less,' huh?" she asked and pulled my ear.

"Hey! That hurts!"

"Sheesh! How can you say that to a cutie like me?" Miori let out a little huff of anger. She'd never done that in the past, and the gesture almost seemed flirtatious.

Because of Nanase's strong emphasis on how pretty Miori was, I subconsciously examined her face. *She really is attractive. She's certainly beautiful enough that I might've accidentally fallen for her if I didn't know her personality already.*

Feeling my gaze upon her while we walked, Miori suddenly turned, and our eyes met. Startled, she took a step away from me. "Wh-What? Why're you staring at me?"

"Oh, uh, no reason," I replied.

"Is there something on my face?"

"No. I told you it's nothing," I replied hastily. My response came out colder than I'd intended because I was panicked.

Silence fell over us for a short while.

"Then, were you just staring at my face?" she asked, breaking the silence.

I didn't want to admit that I had been because it felt like I would lose at something if I did. "I wasn't staring," I replied while looking away.

Miori's voice got noticeably higher pitched. "Hmm? Really? I see, I see. So you're also captivated by my beauty."

I didn't need to look at her to know that she was smirking hard right now. *I will deny this with my all, but I'm really not captivated one bit. If anything, I'm just proving that I'm not enamored with your face!*

"Ah ha ha! Take this!" Miori playfully pushed my left shoulder with her right, interrupting my mental excuses.

We were a boy and a girl, but Miori made physical contact feel natural. As

expected of a true-blood popular kid. They're just built different. Or does she not consider me a guy? That's probably more likely, I thought.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" I exclaimed.

"Hmm? This is training so you get used to girls," she replied easily.

I can't prevent my pulse from accelerating even if it's you, Miori, so please cut it out! Oh, but I'm completely fine. It's just a bit jarring. Obviously I don't view you as a girl or anything. I'm not conscious about you at all, okay?

"But you better not fall for me. I have Reita-kun already," she added.

"Why are you talking about him like he's already yours?" I retorted.

"Because that's what's going to happen, per the plan!" Miori declared with oomph and threw her chest out.

They weren't as large as Hoshimiya's, but that action accentuated her own fairly hefty breasts. They distracted me for a moment, but I knew Miori was sharp, so I quickly averted my eyes. *You used to be flat as a board, but I see you've grown up well!*

"And so I thought it was about time we ironed out the details of our plan," she said.

We passed through the station gates as we talked. There were plenty of seats on the Takasaki Line, so we sat down next to each other and the train slowly eased away.

"Oh, right, we agreed on your Plan Double Date a while ago," I recalled.

"Exactly! I put the plan on hold because of your Tatsuya brouhaha. I wanted things to settle down in your group first, but I think it should be fine by now," Miori explained. "Me and Reita, you and Hikari-chan—we'll both get to make progress with our crushes, so it'll be two birds with one stone. Let's do it!"

A week had passed since Tatsuya had returned to our group. *Miori's right. There shouldn't be any issues now. It's about time we kicked off our plan. I know I'm certainly not making any progress towards dating Hoshimiya with the way things are now.*

After some serious contemplation, I finally replied, "All right. I've been

thinking about the plan too.”

“Oh? You’re being surprisingly proactive. Very nice! Let’s get down to business.”

I said that, but I only thought about it today when I was talking to Hoshimiya.
“Let’s go watch a movie, just the four of us,” I suggested.

“A movie? Sounds good to me, but why a movie?” Miori asked.

“This novel that Hoshimiya likes is getting a movie adaptation. I borrowed the book from her and read it, so I think that’d be a good pretext to invite her to see the movie.” Hoshimiya had gushed about that movie adaptation, so I figured she was already planning on watching it.

“Makes sense. Which movie?” Miori asked.

“The Hero Detective. It’s a mystery with action sprinkled in.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that. There are a lot of ads for it lately.”

“Not interested?” I questioned.

“No, I like movies. Sounds good.”

“The novel’s really good. I think it’ll do well as a movie, contrary to some adaptations,” I said encouragingly. *I’ve already seen the movie before, so I can confirm that much, at least.*

“Will Reita-kun want to go?” Miori asked.

“He enjoys watching movies, so I think he’ll probably come if we invite him.”
Once, when it was just the two of us talking, Reita had told me that he often watched movies on days he didn’t have practice. *He did say he mostly watches Western flicks, but hopefully that doesn’t mean he dislikes Japanese ones.*

“Really? I didn’t know Reita-kun appreciates film. That’s great!”

“I like movies too, you know.”

“Yeah, but all you watch are anime movies, right?”

“What’s wrong with anime movies?!” I yelled.

“No need to blow a fuse. I didn’t say there was anything wrong with them,”

Miori said.

“Oh, yeah, I guess so. My bad,” I apologized. *I felt some otaku persecution complex there. I’m sorry for being a pain in the ass...*

“Anyway, you should initiate the plan by asking Hikari-chan out first.”

“No way, that’s practically a confession! Wouldn’t it be better to act like the two of us are going to see it and we’re inviting her as an afterthought? You know, because she likes the novel. Make it casual.”

“Sure, whatever you want, but what about Reita-kun?”

“I’ll invite him normally. Reita knows I like Hoshimiya, so he’ll probably come if I ask him to help me out.”

“Okay! It sounds like a good plan, but you’ll have to do most of the work.”

I paused for a moment. “It’s fine. You helped me a lot recently. We’ll call it even after this.”

“Ha ha. So you do know how to thank someone. You’re cute as a button, as always,” Miori said with a smile.

I don’t feel happy about being called cute... I’m a guy, so I want people to think I’m cool. And what’s even cute about me in the first place? Nothing.

“When should we go? We should at least have some dates ready, right?” Miori said.

“Good point. How about next Saturday? Oh, but you and Reita have practice. Reita usually has weekend afternoons off, though,” I said.

“Girls’ basketball also meets in the morning, so the afternoon should be fine.”

We settled on next Saturday as our primary candidate and ended our discussion there, with perfect timing since we’d reached our station and got off the train. The sky was, as expected, pitch-black once we exited the gates. There were few street lights and not a person in sight because we were out in the sticks. It was honestly kinda scary.

I’m a guy, and even I feel kinda spooked. Miori’s a girl, so she’s probably also gotta be a little scared, I thought and turned to check on her, but she was

browsing Minsta as she walked without a care in the world. *Of course she isn't the type to be afraid of the dark.*

"Have you been talking to Reita lately?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

"Well..." Miori frowned and made a little noise like she was thinking. "It's hard to talk because we're not in the same class. I chat with him in the hallway every now and then, or after practice when I'm with him and Uta."

"Wow, you're already talking to him after practice," I said, impressed.

"The soccer club hangs around the bike parking lot, so when I walk with Uta, I naturally get the chance to talk to Reita-kun. It doesn't happen every time, though." Miori smiled brightly and added, "That's why I'm so grateful to Uta."

"Does Uta know you're gunning for Reita?"

"I've never stated it, but I'm sure she's realized."

"I wouldn't bet on it. This is Uta we're talking about," I said, making a prediction. *Uta somehow didn't notice Tatsuya's crush on her, even after years of being with him!*

"You don't get to say that!" She smacked my head. And she was completely right to; I was terrible at reading other people's emotions, so I was in no position to judge Uta.

"Hmm? Isn't your house that way?" Miori asked, tilting her head. Here I was still walking with her after we usually parted ways.

"It's late. I can't let a girl walk home alone."

"Oho, nice one. It's important to be considerate, just like that. You're on your way to becoming popular!"

"I don't care if I look good in front of you. I'm simply concerned for your well-being," I said. *It doesn't matter how manly you act. You still look like a cute girl on the outside. These streets are empty, and you could get attacked by someone. I'll be worried if I don't see you safely home.*

"I... I see..." Miori murmured, looking down at her feet.

Silence fell upon the darkened streets.

Concerned, I spoke up. “What’s wrong? Why’d you clam up suddenly?”

“It’s nothing. I always walk home alone after practice, so I’m used to it. Don’t get cocky! You’re just Natsuki.”

“Huh? Why are you dissing me now?!” I exclaimed. Miori was looking away, but I could tell I had upset her.

Am I that out of touch with other humans? And here I thought I had a decent understanding of Miori since we’re childhood friends... As I was thinking that, we reached her house.

“Okay, see you,” I said and turned to walk home.

“Wait, Natsuki.” Miori pulled on my sleeve before I could walk away. I turned, wondering what she wanted. She looked like she was glaring at me, but instead of snapping at me, she said, “Thanks for walking me home.”

“Y-Yeah, of course...” I said, confused. *Your expression and your words aren’t matching up. What are you feeling right now?* I wondered, but I had a feeling that I’d be stirring up a hornet’s nest if I asked, so I just meekly accepted her gratitude and left.



The day after Miori and I formulated our plan, I waited for my chance to talk to Hoshimiya. The six of us friends often chatted together, but I hadn't anticipated how few opportunities there would be to speak privately with Hoshimiya. I could try to talk to her during cleaning time, but Hino and Fujiwara would still be within earshot.

I just didn't have it in me to boldly ask her to the movies with other people watching. And so time flew by as I constantly kept an eye out for any opportunity to speak to her. Before long, the end of fourth period bell chimed, signaling lunchtime.

Tatsuya, Reita, and I went to the cafeteria to eat while Hoshimiya, Nanase, and Uta stayed in the classroom to eat their bentos. We occasionally switched things up and ate together, but for the most part, we separated into lunch groups by gender. *We eat together in the cafeteria sometimes, but we get a lot of stares when we do, so it's too nerve-racking to do that every day.*

"...and so their manager was the ref," Tatsuya finished saying.

Ack, I missed the beginning of the story because I was lost in thought!

Tatsuya shoveled a spoonful of his large-sized curry into his mouth and then continued the story. "I'm telling you, they were huge! They bounced up and down whenever she ran. Everyone kept sneaking peeks at her, so they'd fumble—until Coach snapped and swapped every single starter out. Isn't that hilarious?" he said with a smile so large we could see his pearly whites.

Ah, sounds like the basketball club had a practice game last Saturday. He must be talking about what happened during that, I quickly surmised. Tatsuya usually talked about things we couldn't discuss in front of the girls when it was just us three guys.

"Wow, so you got to play, Tatsuya?" I asked as if I had listened to the whole story.

"Hell yeah, I did! I scored fifteen, no, sixteen points. I was great on the court," he replied proudly.

"So the first-years weren't distracted by her breasts?" I asked.

“Of course not. I don’t know what the hell those guys were looking at in the middle of a game. They clearly let their guard down.”

“It’s funny to hear reasonable logic come out of your mouth,” I commented.

“What’d you say?!” Tatsuya yelled.

My inner thoughts had accidentally leaked out, shocking Tatsuya. I’d been slipping up a lot around him lately. *Well, I’m not scared to speak my mind when I’m with him anymore, thanks to a certain incident. So I guess that’s a good thing? Maybe?*

Reita, who’d been slurping up his meh-tasting mori soba, suddenly gasped and said, “Tatsuya isn’t into big boobs! So that’s why it had no effect.”

“That’s not what you were supposed to get from that!” Tatsuya protested.

I feel like he’s been the butt of our jokes lately. I guess Reita’s always teased Tatsuya, but I still feel kinda bad for him.

“And anyway, where the hell did you get the idea that I don’t like big boobs?” Tatsuya questioned.

“Hmm? Well, it’s kind of obvious...” Reita shrugged and looked at me.

“Right?”

Hey, why’re you looking at me?! My brows furrowed as I pondered why that fact should be obvious. “Oh!” I cried and hit my palm with my fist. “It’s because you like Uta!”

I get it! Uta doesn’t have any boobs; it’s not an exaggeration to call her flat as a board. So Reita is implying that because Tatsuya likes Uta, he’s not particularly into big boobs. Wow, I’m normally terrible at understanding human emotions, but I caught onto Reita’s train of thought there! Heh heh heh. I’ve grown as a person.

I grinned, feeling good about myself. The smile was soon wiped off my face because Tatsuya wrapped his arm around my neck and began to squeeze hard. *What’d I do?*

“Dude, hey! Uncle! Uncle! I said uncle!” I cried out.

“Tatsuya, he’ll die if you don’t let go,” Reita calmly pointed out—once I

started foaming at the mouth—saving me from certain death.

Tatsuya glared at Reita, who'd been acting like this was none of his business, and then sighed. "Who I like and what size boobs I like are separate stories."

"I guess you're the type of guy who likes the boobs of whoever he's crushing on," Reita decided.

"Should I put you through the wringer like I did to Natsuki?" Tatsuya threatened, a vein popping out on his forehead. He moved closer to Reita, about to put him into a choke hold as well.

But a familiar voice called out to us before he could do it. "Oh, there they are! Heyooo!"

Speak of the devil and something whatever. She's here! I thought. None other than Uta herself ran over to us, with Nanase and Hoshimiya following after.

"Whatcha guys talkin' about?" Uta asked.

The three of us froze for a moment. Reita, Tatsuya, and I silently made eye contact, and as if there'd been nothing dubious about the nature of our conversation, Reita said, "Nothing much. We were talking about how tasty the cafeteria's food is."

"Curry is clearly the best when it comes to cost performance, but we were debating whether the yakitoridon is actually better if you're willing to pay a bit more. Right, Natsuki?" Tatsuya said, dead serious.

"Yeah. Personally, I just can't disregard the karaagedon from the equation." I backed him up with a solemn nod.

Uta stared at us blankly. "That sounds like a stupid conversation."

We'd managed to cover up our actual topic, but in return, the three of us took a critical blow from her savage words. Even Reita was shaking slightly and clutching his chest.

I cleared my throat loudly and changed the subject. "A-Anyway, why'd you guys come all the way here? What's up?"

The first-year classrooms were quite far from the cafeteria. Normally, the six of us reconvened in our classroom, so I was curious why the girls had gone out

of their way to walk all the way here. It was already too late for them to eat lunch.

“The weather’s nice, so we’re on a stroll! We were just dropping by,” Uta said with her usual energy and pointed out the window.

I followed her finger, and just as she’d said, the weather was cheery and the sky was a bright blue. It was also mildly warm, with a pleasant breeze blowing outside. It would’ve been a perfect day to nap out there.

“The rainy season is supposed to start next week, so we’re not going to get weather like this again for a while,” Hoshimiya added.

Oh, yeah, the weather channel did mention that this morning. June starts next week, with the rainy season tagging along. It’s going to rain all next week, apparently.

“Ugh, that sucks,” Tatsuya groaned.

“You’re lucky your practices are held indoors,” Reita said with a sigh.

Yeah, the outdoor clubs have it rough during the rainy season, I mentally agreed.

“We’re stuck running laps inside the school building or weight lifting,” Reita continued.

“Man, can’t they build indoor fields for you guys or something?” Tatsuya complained.

“Maybe if we become a powerhouse. The good part about Gunma is there’s plenty of land to use,” Reita said optimistically.

We finished eating as we continued to complain about the rainy season and then returned to our classroom. The six of us were walking side by side down the hall until Hoshimiya suddenly stopped.

“Oh! I want to drop by the library first. I’ll see you guys back in class!” she said.

I’d thought it was strange that she had been walking around with a bag in tow, but it looked like she wanted to return some books.

“Uh-huh,” grunted Tatsuya.

“Okay!” Uta exclaimed.

“Sure thing,” Reita said.

“I’ll see you back in class,” said Nanase.

The others nodded and continued to head back to class, leaving Hoshimiya behind. *This is my chance!* I thought.

“That reminds me, I also want to drop by the library. I want to borrow a book,” I said. The other four acknowledged me as well and then left, leaving me and Hoshimiya alone. We were right by the library, so we entered together.

“What book are you borrowing?” Hoshimiya asked.

“I don’t have a specific book in mind, but I really enjoyed *The Hero Detective* that you lent me. I was thinking I’d find something similar,” I replied.

“Oooh! Good, good, very good.” Hoshimiya approved of my decision with a big smile.

Hey, we’ve got a decent mood going, and the conversation is actually flowing in the perfect direction. Since we’re on the topic of The Hero Detective, it should feel natural if I bring up the movie now. A-All right, don’t choke now.

“Oh, right, Hoshimiya. Remember how we talked about the movie adaptation for *The Hero Detective* yesterday?” I began.

“Yeah! I can’t wait for it to be released!”

“Me too, same here. So, do you want to go see it with me?”

“...Of course, that sounds fun!”

Is it just me, or was there a pause before she replied? Was it just my imagination? Or was she hesitating?

While I deliberated over the meaning of that brief moment of silence, Hoshimiya kept the conversation moving. “Should we invite someone else since we’re going?”

Oh... This is a clear sign that she doesn’t want to be alone with me. She’s implying that she doesn’t mind going to the movies on the weekend, but she

doesn't really want to go with just me. Well, being alone on the weekend at the movies clearly means you're on a date, right? I've got some high hurdles to overcome to date her, I thought.

"Yeah. Actually, Miori already told me she wanted to see it," I answered after gathering my thoughts. I'd prepared a cover story for this very reason.

"Miori-chan did?! Does she like movies? That's a bit unexpected," Hoshimiya replied.

"Yeah, it's certainly unexpected, but apparently she does," I said, pulling explanations out of my ass.

Hoshimiya thought for a moment and then murmured, "But won't I be in the way?"

"Huh? Why would you be?"

"Because aren't you two childhood friends?" she said carefully.

No! Does Hoshimiya think there's something going on between me and Miori?! Well, I guess people do usually assume that when they see childhood friends of opposite genders, but I never thought that logic would be applied to me!

"No, absolutely not. We also want to invite Reita. He likes watching movies in his free time," I explained.

"Oh, I see. So Reita-kun would be coming too..." she pondered.

We both fell silent as we perused the bookshelves.

Hoshimiya's cheeks flushed to a soft pink, and she looked at me. "Wait, is that what's going on?" she asked.

Is what going on? What are you thinking? I panicked. *Did she see through my plan? Crap, she might've figured out that I've got a crush on her! Was my plan too brash? What do I do? What should I say?* The gears in my mind whirled as I tried to come up with an excuse.

Hoshimiya's eyes twinkled, and she said, "The thought crossed my mind during our study group at the café, but does Miori-chan like Reita-kun?"

I was in shock for a moment. *Oh, that's what she meant?! She's talking about Miori, not me! That is half the plan, so Hoshimiya's guess isn't wrong. Which means she hasn't figured out my feelings for her yet.*

I internally let out a sigh of relief and thought about how to answer her. *Even though Miori is connected to the group through me, her childhood friend, it stands out more for her to ask Reita out than for me to ask Hoshimiya to the movies. Hoshimiya and I are part of the same friend group, and we're classmates. At least, if you examined the four of us in a vacuum, that's how the situation looks.*

Hoshimiya took my silence as a confirmation of her theory and covered her mouth with both hands. "I thought so! I see what's going on... And you can't say anything because she ordered you to keep it a secret!"

"Uh, not exactly," I mumbled. *She didn't order me or anything. Of course I'm hesitant to tell Reita, but it should be fine for Hoshimiya to know, right? Well, it's probably too late to do anything since she took my silence as a yes.*

Hoshimiya giggled. "You don't have to say anything. I'll help you two out! I wanted to see the movie anyway, and I like this kind of thing, so I'm killing two birds with one stone! I can't wait!"

This isn't how I imagined the conversation going, but I guess it's fine... I hope.

"We were thinking of going next Saturday afternoon. Does that work for you?" I asked.

"That's perfect for me! I'm usually super free on Saturdays. So now we just need to get Reita-kun on board!"

"I'll ask Reita. We'll figure out the time and place later."

We wrapped up the conversation, which left the most important person, Reita. *I know he likes watching movies, but that doesn't mean he'll come for sure. I can only pray that he does.*

"A movie? Oh, *The Hero Detective*. I was thinking of watching it, so sure." Reita readily accepted my invitation after school.

I told him who else was going, and unlike Hoshimiya, he didn't have much to say besides a simple, "Okay." I deliberated about whether I should ask him his thoughts on the group but decided it would be best to leave it be. *Reita's probably figured out Miori's after him, and he knows that I like Hoshimiya anyway*, I reasoned.

"Okay, then, I'm off to practice now, but just to confirm, are we going next Saturday?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm thinking around 1 p.m."

"Got it. That should be fine with me, but I'll let you know if something comes up," Reita said. He waved goodbye and left the classroom.

Whew, I was a ball of nerves today, but I managed to pull through, I thought before mumbling, "All right, time to go home."

I don't have work today, so I'll exercise after I get home. Muscles will never betray me, after all. I was thinking about my plans for the rest of the day when I heard footsteps from the direction of the door. I turned to check who it was, only to see a short, cute girl. It was Sakura Uta.

"What's up? Shouldn't you be at practice?" I asked.

Uta scratched her head and giggled sheepishly. "Oh, uh, I forgot something!" She hurried over to her desk and began rummaging through it as if she was searching for something.

Did she overhear Reita and me? I wondered.

"Hey, Natsu." Uta stopped searching through her desk and looked over at me. It seemed like she had found whatever it was she'd forgotten. Her expression lacked its usual energy, and she seemed anxious. "So you're going to see a movie?"

"Oh, did you hear us talking about it? That's right. We're going to see one together," I replied.

"You, Rei, Hikarin, and Miorin?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's the plan right now."

"That's an unusual mix of people."

I thought carefully before answering. "I guess so. I invited people who are into mystery movies." It wasn't a lie, but more of a twisted untruth.

"...I want to go too."

"Huh? We're watching *The Hero Detective*, you know. Do you want to see it?" I asked, thinking that it was out of character for her.

Uta slowly shook her head no. "Sorry. I'm not actually interested in the movie."

Then why do you want to go? I almost asked, but I noticed the way she was looking at me. Uta was sitting on her desk, her body leaning towards me as she stared at me with bright-red cheeks. She said nothing more.

We were the only two people left, and silence blanketed the classroom. We could hear the baseball club yelling from outside. *Even I can figure out this puzzle. The answer's basically being forced down my throat. Uta doesn't want to see the movie; she wants to go with me. I'm sure of it. It's because she's in love with me.*

My heart pounded. I didn't know how much time passed as we stared at each other, eyes locked. Uta was adorable, and it felt like her big, round eyes were sucking me in. *Man, I'm way too easy. I suddenly think Uta looks like the cutest thing ever just because she's openly displaying her feelings for me. She really does love me, I finally accepted. But this is no time to be fawning over her. She says she wants to go with us, so I need to think of a response. But what am I supposed to say? What's the correct answer here?*

It's essential for Miori's plan that we have four people to get the double date vibes. Therefore, it's not beneficial for Uta to tag along. I'd like to say yes, I really would. Chatting about the movie together sounds like a good time. It'd definitely be a fun day if Uta were there, I'm sure of it. But I love Hoshimiya! I can't return Uta's feelings. So what am I supposed to say here?

"Well, if you're not into this movie, then wouldn't it be better to sit this one out?" I finally said, purposefully choosing an innocuous answer.

Uta nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Then, if the chance arises, want to do something together next time?"

“Of course. I want to hang out with you too,” I replied honestly.

Uta instantly replaced her uneasy expression with a smile that bloomed like a beautiful flower. Part of my answer had been because of the guilt I felt from leaving her out, so I felt a sharp pain in my chest when I saw how happy she’d become.

She glanced at the clock and gasped. “S-Sorry! Practice is starting soon, so I gotta run! See you tomorrow!” she yelled behind her as she rushed out of the classroom in a panic.

While she ran away, I watched her back become smaller until she turned the corner. Her expression from moments earlier was etched into my mind. I’d always considered Uta an expressive girl, but I’d never thought that a few words from me could ignite such an enormous change in her expression.

I just don’t know. What am I supposed to do? I really, really have no clue.

As a teenager, I’d always lived in a dreary world. No girl had ever loved me until now. I’d experienced plenty of one-sided crushes, but that was it. “Romance”? For me it was more like “no-mance”! That’s why even though I’d known Uta had a crush on me, I hadn’t really *felt* it. But now that I was fully aware, I still didn’t know what to do.

Things would be simple if I were in love with Uta. We’d get a happy ending. But what about now, when I don’t feel the same towards her? I... I don’t want to make Uta sad. I want her to smile and be happy. How do all the popular guys in the world handle all the girls who like them? I continued contemplating the situation all the way home.

One week flew by, and Saturday came quickly. Miori and I met up at our station to take the train to Maebashi together. She sat next to me during the ride, looking much cuter than normal. It wasn’t my first time seeing Miori in something besides her school uniform, but I could tell she’d put more effort into her outfit today. Her makeup was also flawless, so perfect that she looked like she was shining. But I kept quiet because it felt like I’d lose if I praised her appearance.

I decided to talk about something else. I wanted to ask her what I should do about Uta. Miori was my reliable partner in my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan, and she was in the same club as Uta, so I figured she was the best person to consult.

“Can’t you just leave it for now and keep her on the side?” Miori said after listening to the gist of things.

“Uh, that sounds insincere...” I muttered.

“You’re definitely a virgin if insincere is the word that comes to mind.” She glared at me and then flicked my forehead.

Ow, stop that!

Ignoring my inner cry, she continued. “Besides, it’s not like you and Hikari-chan are dating. You don’t need to push Uta away at this stage. And who knows? Maybe you’ll fall for her.”

I might fall for her? Huh. I never considered that. Uta’s smile flashed through my mind. Honestly, I can’t say for sure it’ll never happen.

“Guys can’t help but pay attention to a girl who wholeheartedly loves them,” Miori whispered.

“Urgh...” A little rumble escaped from me.

“I’ve got a better question for you: why not date Uta? She’s cute and has a great personality—you’re not going to find many girls better than her. She’s almost too good for you. Actually, you really don’t deserve her!” Her words stabbed me like a knife.

“I know that better than anyone,” I replied weakly. *Uta loves someone like me, and I do appreciate her feelings. But I know that my heart is already set on Hoshimiya.*

It had happened in that moment, on the day of the entrance ceremony. When our eyes met beneath the fluttering cherry blossoms, I’d remembered the lost feelings of love I once harbored for Hoshimiya. I thought she had looked absolutely stunning surrounded by the blooming cherry blossoms.

“Looks like you’re fairly serious about her, huh?” Miori murmured after seeing

me agonize over the subject. She'd read my mind, as usual. Miori then shrugged. "I shouldn't have put it like that. It sounds bad. You're not really keeping her on the side, anyway. You should just treat her like normal as long as she doesn't confess to you. I don't think you need to push her away."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. Her words made me feel a bit better.

"I'm Uta's friend, so I will advise her to keep trying to get close to you," she added.

"Please, no. I won't know what to do if she farms any more affection points from me..." My thoughts slipped out before I could stop myself.

Miori's lips twisted into a smirk. "Oho? Really?"

Aw man, me and my big mouth... I've basically admitted that I do view Uta as a girl and a potential love interest... Oh well, I really have garbage resistance against girls. Of course I'd be interested in a girl who's cute as heck and close to me!

The train came to a stop at our destination while I was internally lashing out at no one in particular over my own weaknesses. We were immediately blasted by hot, stuffy air as soon as we stepped outside. Summer was drawing near. The sky was overcast and it looked like it could rain at any moment. I'd brought a foldable umbrella in my bag just in case.

"The news said the rainy season is starting next week," I commented.

"Yeah, well, we'll be fine even if it rains today. We're not doing anything outside, anyway," she replied.

We exited through the station gates and met up with Hoshimiya and Reita, who were waiting for us by a nearby flower bed. They were so deep in conversation that they didn't notice us walking up to them.

"Oh my gosh, Reita-kun," I overheard Hoshimiya say.

"Ha ha, I'm joking. Your reactions are always a riot," Reita replied, amused.

Wow, they look like your ideal beautiful couple. They really suit each other well. I glanced at Miori. She looked shocked, probably because she'd been thinking the same thing I was.

“I... I didn’t expect the two of them would get along so well...” I whispered.

“Th-They just get along because they’re in the same friend group,” she whispered back. “Probably.”

Both of our voices were trembling.

“Sup!” I called out.

“Hello!” Miori said.

We had a bad feeling about leaving Reita and Hoshimiya be, so we interrupted their good vibes instead.

“G-Good morning... Wait, no, it’s not morning anymore,” Hoshimiya said and giggled bashfully.

She was wearing a yellow shirt and white pants. It was a simple outfit, but it was an excellent look on her. *Hoshimiya is stylish as always.*

“It’s already 1 p.m. Did you just wake up?” Reita asked, teasing her. He was wearing a white polo and the pants from our school uniform. It looked like he’d come straight from practice.

Maybe I scheduled this too close to his practice, I thought.

“No! I didn’t! I woke up at ten!” Hoshimiya insisted.

“That’s pretty late,” I quipped.

Hoshimiya looked a bit embarrassed. “It’s because I went back to sleep the first time I woke up...”

“I’m jealous. I woke up at seven. Miori, I’m guessing you did too?” Reita asked.

Miori had also gone to practice in the morning, but she’d rushed home to shower and change clothes. *I guess her practice ends earlier than the soccer club’s? But I’m impressed that she made the round trip back to our town. It’s a far trek indeed. She’s really giving it her all today.*

Hey, wait! When did Reita start calling her just “Miori”? Didn’t he used to call her “Miori-chan”? I see you’ve been steadily closing the distance while I’m not around.

“I woke up at six! It takes a while to get to school,” Miori answered.

“Does your practice start at eight thirty?” he asked.

“Yep, that’s right. I’d have an easier time if we started at nine instead,” Miori lamented.

Their conversation was going well, so Hoshimiya and I looked at each other. She beamed at me with a bright smile. “I can’t wait to see the movie!”

“Same,” I agreed. *I really am looking forward to the movie, but I’m more excited to be with Hoshimiya, especially when she’s having so much fun. All right, let’s kill it today!*

The four of us walked to a mall near the station that had a movie theater inside. First, we purchased tickets for *The Hero Detective*, and then we began wandering around the place to kill time until the movie started. We were just window shopping for the most part. Miori said she wanted to look at clothes, so we all followed her around.

That’s exactly what Miori and I had planned for today: we’d have about an hour before the movie started. It was a miraculous opportunity (that we’d scheduled in) for us to put to good use in getting closer to Reita and Hoshimiya... At least, that was the plan.

“Wow! This summer outfit is super cute!” Miori exclaimed.

“Yeah, Miori-chan, it’ll definitely look good on you! Try it on! Try it on!” Hoshimiya enthusiastically agreed.

The two of them were having a fun time shopping instead. Miori, who was squealing over all the clothes with Hoshimiya, noticed my judgmental stare and cleared her throat. “Wouldn’t it be unnatural if I just spoke to Reita-kun? This is also part of the plan,” she whispered to me so the other two couldn’t hear. It wasn’t a convincing excuse at all.

“I kinda doubt that... Ah, well, Hoshimiya seems like she’s having fun,” I replied.

“Hey! You’re the one who needs to talk to Hikari-chan more. I don’t see you

doing much!”

Reita spotted us whispering furiously and smiled. “You two really are childhood friends. You sure are close.”

We both jumped, and our shoulders trembled. *That is the worst possible conclusion you could reach!*

“N-No way! We’re not close at all,” I denied.

“Y-Yeah, that’s right! I just can’t get rid of this guy,” Miori said and pinched my cheek.

Ow! Hey, stop that! This makes it look like we are close. Quit it! So you’re the type of person who can’t make rational decisions when you’re panicked, huh?!

Reita’s shoulders were shaking. He looked like he was witnessing an extremely amusing spectacle.

“Anyway, I’m going to try on this one!” Miori changed the topic and ran off to the fitting room with the summer clothes that Hoshimiya had been encouraging her to try on.

“Is it just me, or does she seem flustered today?” Reita turned to me after observing Miori’s behavior.

“Yeah, she does,” I agreed. *She’s definitely off her game today! She’s normally way more composed than this. I guess even Miori gets nervous around her crush. Well, all things said, she is just a first-year in high school. She acts like she’s used to talking to guys, but maybe she’s just pretending to be tough. You know, that kind of makes Miori seem cute.*

“Psst, hey! Natsuki-kun.” Hoshimiya tugged on my sleeve as we waited in front of the changing room.

E-Excuse me... Please don’t pull on my sleeve like that. It makes my heart leap!

“What do you think about this?” Hoshimiya lifted an aqua-colored button-down up to her torso. I didn’t have much of a fashion sense, but it looked like it would accent her figure well.

“I think it looks good on you,” I told her.

“Yay!” she happily cheered. “I’m also thinking about this one. Come over here!” Hoshimiya grabbed my hand and led me away to look at clothes. I was rattled by the turn of events and could only wordlessly flap my mouth open and closed. She stopped after we were a decent distance away from the changing room and giggled happily with a big smile on her face.

“Hoshimiya?” I questioned, cocking my head to the side.

She brought a finger to her lips to hush me and said in a low voice, “Heh heh. I thought it’d be good to give them some alone time.”

I followed her gaze to the changing room. Miori had just opened the curtain. “Huh? Where’s the other two, Reita-kun?” she asked.

“They went over there to look at clothes, so it’s just me,” he explained.

“O-Oh, I see,” she replied timidly.

Miori’s acting real meek today, I thought. But is she just acting? It doesn’t look like it. It’s funny that she’s the one who told me to get her alone with Reita, but when I follow through, she looks like a ball of nerves. What, can’t be confident in front of Reita?

“That outfit suits you. I think it’s cute,” Reita complimented her.

“Really? Thanks.”

Wow! He complimented her without missing a beat, as expected of Reita. I’d sound like a broken robot if I tried to say those lines. I could never tell a girl she’s cute straight to her face. Ever.

“Then maybe I’ll buy this,” Miori said.

“Yeah, I think you should. Is that the right size?” Reita naturally continued the conversation. Miori nodded.

While we were watching the two of them getting along, Hoshimiya whispered to me. “You know, Reita-kun is really impressive. He just says things that any girl would be happy to hear, and his delivery is so natural.”

“Yeah. Guys who’re popular are built different,” I agreed.

“Did you know he’s really popular among the girls in our year? When I hear

him talk like that, I understand why.”

“Yeah, I envy him,” I admitted honestly. I could feel Hoshimiya’s gaze on me. When I looked over at her, she looked displeased for some reason.

“...You’re just as popular as he is. What’re you saying...?” she muttered under her breath.

What? Really? I have noticed more girls staring at me lately, I thought, but I refuted the notion. “No way, I’m not like Reita. I don’t talk to girls outside of you, Nanase, and Uta.”

It’s true! A socially inept guy like me would only meet with failure if I tried to expand my circle of friends. I’m going to go slow and steady at making new friends, I reasoned. There were still many girls in our class whom I had basically never spoken a word to.

“But that makes you look cool instead, so isn’t that good for your image?” Hoshimiya pointed out.

“R-Really? Is that a thing? Hoshimiya, are you sure you’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

“I’m not! The three of us are close to you, so we know about your disappointing sides, but the other girls don’t.”

“D-Disappointing?” I repeated. I felt happy that Hoshimiya considered us close, but at the same time, I was dismayed to hear her describe me as disappointing.

Seeing that I was going through a roller coaster of emotions, Hoshimiya quickly tacked on, “Oh, not like that! I called it disappointing, but, um, you know how we overheard your talk with Tatsuya? A lot of people still think you’re perfect, but we know that you’re actually human like the rest of us! That’s what I mean!”

My heart was as fragile as glass at the moment, but I managed to recover after taking in a healthy dose of the cute and panicked Hoshimiya.

“I... I see... I wish everyone would stop having such high expectations of me. Please, guys,” I mumbled. *If you fantasize about me, you’re going to be heavily*

disappointed once you actually get to know me.

We both went silent for a moment. I struggled to come up with a new conversation topic, but Hoshimiya spoke up first. "Natsuki-kun, do you want to be popular?"

"Huh? Why're you asking that?"

"Because you just said you were envious of how popular Reita-kun is." She was bringing up what I'd accidentally mentioned just moments ago.

Well, I am a guy. Of course I want girls to pay attention to me. But it won't look good if I admit that in front of Hoshimiya. I'd better dodge the question.

"No, it was just a figure of speech," I said, trying to explain it away.

"Really? Then you must be glad to hear you're so popular," she replied doubtfully.

It's no use. She doesn't believe me at all. What do I have to say to trick her? I wondered. After thinking at the speed of light, I came up with the genius idea to return her question with another question. "Well, what about you, Hoshimiya?"

"M-Me? Hmm... I've never wanted to be popular before," she said after some thought.

Ah, the opinion of the mighty! An unpopular girl would be pissed if she heard that.

"But I *do* want people to think I'm beautiful, and I'm still working on that," Hoshimiya said as she fiddled with her necklace.

That was an opinion I could relate to. I'd put effort into becoming cool, so of course I wanted people to actually think I was cool. I simply wanted others to acknowledge that I was doing my best.

"You are beautiful, Hoshimiya," I couldn't help but mutter, perhaps because I'd felt as if I was connected to her through my feelings of empathy.

Hoshimiya looked at me, her eyes widening in surprise where she stood. She even blinked a few times. *Oh god, I want to run away!* I thought.

"Ummm, thank you?" she said.

What the hell am I doing? Why'd you blurt that out? C-Calm down, me...

“W-We better head back, or else they’re going to get suspicious of us!” Hoshimiya suddenly said in a high-pitched voice and then walked back to Reita and Miori. Her movements were stiff and awkward. From the side, I could see a mysterious hint of scarlet coloring her cheeks.

“Huh? Weren’t you picking out clothes to try on?” Reita asked, his head slightly tilted to the side.

“Oh, um, they were all kinda meh, so I decided not to.” Hoshimiya managed to scrounge up a sound answer.



Miori had decided to purchase the clothes that Reita had praised. She had a paper bag with the store's logo dangling from her hand. She quietly sidled up to me and whispered, "Where'd you go?"

"Hmm? I got us some alone time, just as planned," I answered. "Is there a problem?"

She hesitated, displeasure plastered on her face. "You left me alone without warning! Of course I'd be surprised."

It's not like I'm the one who intended for this to happen, anyway, I thought. "More importantly, why are you being so timid today? What happened to being assertive like during the study group? Shouldn't you act like that now?"

After a beat, she said, "He won't like it if I come on too strong. I'm purposefully toning it down today. That's all."

As I listened to her explanation, I glanced at my watch. It was almost time for the movie to start. "I think we should get a move on. Let's go," I suggested.

"We've got about five minutes to get back," Reita murmured and nodded. "Yeah, I like watching the previews before the actual movie."

"Oh, me too! Sometimes you can find other movies that look interesting!" Hoshimiya chimed in. The two of them looked excited.

It really is advantageous to have mutual hobbies, I thought. I occasionally watched anime movies, but I wasn't a film otaku, and Miori only watched them about as often as the average Joe. The two of us couldn't keep up with their passionate small talk.

Our operation's barely begun, but are things truly going to go according to plan? I was happy to just get to hang out with Hoshimiya over the weekend, yet I couldn't help but worry about things going south.

The four of us entered the dimly lit movie theater. The previews hadn't yet begun to play, so the theater was still somewhat alive with chatter. We'd been able to secure seats in the middle since we'd purchased our tickets early.

I wanted to sit next to Hoshimiya, Miori wanted to sit next to Reita, and

Hoshimiya wanted to help Miori and Reita get closer. Thanks to our motives lining up like that, we took our desired seats after silently making eye contact. From the right facing the screen, our order was Hoshimiya, me, Miori, and then Reita.

The previews began rolling as soon as we sat down. I glanced at Hoshimiya. She was intently watching the trailers while munching away on some popcorn. She looked kinda like an adorable little animal.

“Can you finish all that?” I asked her, looking at the bag of popcorn in her hand.

“Maybe not... I got carried away and ordered too much. Do you want some, Natsuki-kun?” Hoshimiya replied.

I accepted her offer and popped some caramel popcorn into my mouth. *Urgh, it's too sweet! Salty popcorn is where it's at*, I secretly thought.

Miori was doing Miori things and quietly chatting with Reita while they watched the movie previews. They looked like they had a good mood going on, so I didn't want to interrupt.

Just like that, the previews ended, and the movie started. The quiet murmurs around us stopped, and only the sounds of the movie could be heard within the theater. *Man, movie theaters are great! I feel like it's easier to get immersed in the story when the sound system is high quality.* I immediately forgot that we were here on a mission and lost myself in the world of the movie.

The story began with a young boy, the self-proclaimed hero, getting dragged into a murder case. The corpse was rolled away, as per standard mystery plots, but the aforementioned self-proclaimed hero, Harma, lamented that he hadn't arrived in time to save the victim. It was a sorrowful scene.

The novel this movie was based on, *The Hero Detective*, was a mystery series. In each volume, the protagonist never arrived in time to save the victims before they were murdered. In other words, Harma always reached the scene of the crime too late and could only solve the case post mortem. I always thought it was a cruel premise no matter how many times I witnessed it play out. I was already feeling heartbroken.

This movie was the adaptation of the first volume of *The Hero Detective*—Harma's origin story. It all started with a murder at our self-proclaimed hero's school. The victim was Harma's first love and girlfriend, Nika. Her death was the reason Harma would go on to call himself a hero.

"...I was no hero," Harma wallowed on-screen.

Merya, Harma's childhood friend, cheered him up and pulled him out of despair. She was a high school student and famous detective who'd solved one difficult case after the other. She practically forced Harma to assist her in solving Nika's case.

Since I'd already read the novel, it wasn't the deductions or uncovering the tricks behind the murder that kept me enraptured. Of course I was overjoyed to see a work I liked moving on the big screen, but what fascinated me more than that was the depiction of the characters' relationships.

The movie version highlighted and expanded on parts that the novel hadn't really delved into. None other than Nika's friend, Maina, turned out to be the culprit of the case. Maina also got along well with Harma, and so the three of them had often hung out together.

And yet what motivation did she have to kill Nika? After Maina finally admitted to her crime, we learned that it had been because she was in love with Harma. Nika had noticed Maina's feelings towards Harma and tried to separate the two, but Maina resisted. Every time the three of them hung out together, additional cracks had formed in the girls' relationship, all because they loved the same boy.

Eventually, the two had gotten into a huge argument, and Maina accidentally pushed Nika down a flight of stairs, killing her. After that, Maina covered up the real cause of Nika's death, created an alibi, and used various tricks to frame another person. However, Harma and Merya ultimately saw through her deceit.

It was a simple story when you broke it down: two very close friends' relationship had crumbled into pieces due to jealousy. Their happy group was destroyed because of love. Something about the plot felt very familiar, and my mind returned to reality for a moment. I didn't know why, but I looked to the side, right at Hoshimiya.

She was deeply concentrating on the movie and didn't notice I was staring at her even though we were practically a hair's breadth away. I could clearly see her features at this distance. Her face was delicate like a doll's.

How happy would I be if she were my girlfriend? I wondered, but then Uta's face flashed through my mind. *Yet how would Uta feel if Hoshimiya and I started dating?* The events in the film represented an extreme case, but Tatsuya and I had already had a taste of drama brought on by romance.

Obviously, I want to achieve my ideal high school life for my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan. My goal is to have friends I can trust wholeheartedly and a girlfriend I love dearly... But can ideal friendships and romance coexist? Such questions ran around my head throughout the movie.

"That was fantastic!" Hoshimiya exclaimed, eyes twinkling elatedly.

We were at a restaurant inside the shopping mall. After *The Hero Detective* had ended, we'd picked a place that looked like it would allow us to linger for a long time so we could discuss the movie once we finished dinner.

"I'm glad you're having fun talking about the movie, but your hands haven't moved at all," Reita said with a wry smile. He'd already finished eating his Japanese-style pasta.

"W-Well, there are so many things I want to say," Hoshimiya mumbled. There was an unfinished carbonara in front of her.

She ate a ton of popcorn, but she can still chow down on dinner? I'm kinda shook. Hoshimiya can put away a surprising amount of food...

"You can talk all you want after you finish. You'd better eat up before it gets cold," Miori advised her, as if she were scolding a child. She had a motherly personality and therefore couldn't bear to leave Hoshimiya be.

Huh, those two have some good chemistry going on.

"Yeah, I guess so..." Hoshimiya said. "Wait, Miori-chan, you're already done eating?!"

"You get faster when you're in a sports club," Miori said with a strained smile.

“You’re always getting hounded to eat quickly.”

“I feel you,” Reita agreed.

I silently chewed my own pasta as I watched the two of them get riled up about their clubs. *I think there’s a good vibe between them, and it looks like Miori’s gotten over her nerves now.*

When I turned to check on Hoshimiya, our eyes met. We were both nomming on food, so we didn’t say anything aloud, but Hoshimiya spoke to me with her eyes. It looked like she was conveying something like, *“Those two eat too fast!”* with her expression. I nodded twice in agreement.

For the record, I used to be on a sports team back in the past too, but I wasn’t a speedy eater because there’d been nobody to rush me. *No one would’ve been troubled if I wasn’t around, after all, I thought a bit sadly. No one even talked to me in the first place, so of course no one would be yelling at me to hurry up. Wait a second! Did I really need to make that observation?*

Mealtime for the group ended while I was self-inflicting damage on my poor heart, and then our conversation turned to our impressions of *The Hero Detective*. My mind had wandered during the movie, and I’d had trouble paying attention near the end. So I just listened to the others and responded to their comments. They all seemed like they’d wholeheartedly enjoyed the movie, so I didn’t want to be a wet blanket.

In the middle of our conversation, I looked over at the restaurant entrance and let out a quiet, “Huh?” when I noticed who was standing by the door. It was a group of three familiar-looking girls. I’d never spoken to them before, but I recognized their faces.

Aren’t they Ryomei students, like us? If I remember it right, they’re in the girls’ basketball club, I thought, trying to recall where I’d seen them before. I’d been part of the boys’ basketball club in my first round of high school, so I did have a vague recollection of the girls who’d been practicing on the court next to us. *I think they’re a year ahead of us,* I contemplated as I tried to pin down their identities. *And of course, as per usual, I’ve never exchanged a single word with any of them before.*

The server led the three girls to a spot near the four of us since there were

many empty tables in our section of the restaurant. This was a large shopping mall near our high school, so it wasn't a surprise that we'd bumped into other Ryomei students. There were only so many places for teens to hang out in Gunma, after all.

I didn't know them by name, so I decided it'd be best to ignore them, but the three stopped by our table.

"Miori...?" said the girl with a short bob who was standing in the middle of the trio. Her eyes had a stern look to them, but it wouldn't have been an exaggeration to call her beautiful.

Surprised to hear her name, Miori glanced in the direction of the short bob girl's voice. "Wakamura-senpai..."

Oh, right, her name's Wakamura! I still couldn't place the other two girls, but if my memory was correct, Wakamura was the linchpin of the girls' basketball club.

After a beat, Miori asked, "Senpai, why are you here?"

"We just finished individual training. We came here to rest up and chat," Wakamura explained.

Uhhh, is it just me, or is the air in the room getting kinda dicey? Perhaps I was late to the game, but it definitely felt like they were on edge. *Is this what senpai-kouhai relationships are like in a club? Or did something happen?*

The short girl standing next to Wakamura muttered under her breath, "Hmph! I was wondering why you weren't participating in solo training, but it looks like you're just playing with boys."

"Do you have something to say? I'm not skipping practice," Miori replied.

"True. We're not complaining or anything. Come on! Let's go, girls," Wakamura said. She pushed the other two girls towards their seats.

The awkward atmosphere left behind by those three girls made it hard for the four of us to return to our conversation. Miori was the first to break the silence. "I'm sorry. I ruined the mood," she said while stirring the ice around in her caffè latte.

“Did something happen between you guys?” I asked.

“Just a small spat during practice. It’s no biggie, though,” Miori replied, but it sounded more like she was refusing to answer.

With such a nonchalant reply from her, I didn’t have it in me to push the subject any further.

Wanting to drive away the uncomfortable atmosphere, Miori declared in a bright tone, “More importantly, let’s talk about the movie! I want to hear more of your thoughts, Hikari-chan.”



Hoshimiya hesitated but then let the floodgates open. “Yeah, okay! Personally, my favorite part was the last scene where they confronted the culprit. The way they handled it felt completely different from the novel, and...”

Reita and Miori listened to Hoshimiya articulate her thoughts as they nodded and offered up their own opinions. I was impressed that they could turn the mood around so fast. *They’ve got some clutch communication skills, as always,* I thought. *Miori’s trying to smile like normal, but I can tell she looks a bit tense... Hmm, I thought something weird was up with her today. She pulled out all the stops to hit on Reita just a few weeks ago, but she’s been acting so docile today. I assumed she was just being overly conscious about Reita, but now I suspect her nerves are because of something more than that.*

Something must’ve happened during her morning practice, I deduced. *Miori tries not to show any weakness during times like these. She tries to act as normal as possible no matter how depressed she feels. She’s been like that ever since we were kids.*

When we’d had our fill of talking about the movie, we wrapped things up and left the pasta shop.

“I needa go to the bathroom,” I said. Reita tagged along with me too.

Miori and Hoshimiya took a seat on a nearby bench to wait for us.

While I was mindlessly doing my business, Reita, who was standing next to me, spoke up. “Natsuki, have you heard anything?”

Ah, he’s probably talking about what happened just now with Miori. I shook my head.

“So she’s not the type to ask others for help, huh? I hope it’s nothing serious,” Reita muttered to himself.

“You think so? She might’ve already brought the issue up with someone besides me,” I suggested slowly.

“I haven’t known her for long, but I’ve never seen Miori rely on anyone else. Still, it looks like you’re an exception to that since you’re childhood friends. So if

Miori would go to anyone, I think it'd be you," Reita said after a short pause.

Motomiya Miori does not depend on others, I agreed silently. It's true; I've always thought that, growing up with her. She loves taking care of other people, but she never lets others look after her.

"You've been observing her closely. Miori, I mean," I commented. I'd known Miori since she'd been leading kids around as the neighborhood brat commander, but Reita had discerned her nature in one short month. Just how powerful was his perception?

"Didn't I tell you before? I've made it a habit to observe my surroundings," he replied.

Though, sometimes you see too much, right? I recalled the continuation of those words from a talk we'd had before. *Reita really is amazing. Everyone likes him because he acts based on his keen perception. It's not something that someone socially inept like me could copy,* I lamented.

"That's not all I've observed about Miori, though," Reita said in an even tone as he zipped up his pants.

"Huh?" I questioned. *What do you mean by that?*

I was about to ask him to elaborate, but as if he'd read my thoughts, Reita patted me on the shoulder. "Anyway, if Miori's going to let anyone see her vulnerable side, it'll be you. I'm leaving her in your care," he said. With that, he washed his hands and left the bathroom ahead of me.

How much does Reita know? I'm basically on my second lap in life, but I feel like he has far deeper insight than me. Hey, wait a second...

"That bastard," I muttered angrily. "He touched my shoulder before washing his hands!"

You don't need to make me the butt of a joke!

It was raining outside when we exited the mall, despite the fact that the news had predicted the rainy season would start next week. I'd brought a foldable umbrella just in case, but it wouldn't be enough to protect us from the

melancholy that came along with the weather.

It was already almost 7 p.m. Although streetlights illuminated the area, the sky was dark as the four of us walked together to the station. Reita and Hoshimiya had also brought umbrellas. Only Miori hadn't prepared one, so she shared Hoshimiya's.

The umbrella wasn't big enough for two people to huddle underneath it, but they looked like they were having fun walking with their shoulders pressed together. Thankfully, as a silver lining, the rain was pretty weak. At worst, their shoulders would get a little damp.

As soon as we reached the station, Hoshimiya became visibly hurried because her curfew was nearing. "Welp, see you all tomorrow at school!" she called out from behind her and then disappeared through the gates.

"I had fun today. Invite me again if you plan something else," Reita told Miori. He shot her a bright smile and then left for the bike parking lot.

I noticed that Miori had only nodded silently in response to his cheerful words. *The normal Miori would've said, "For sure!" or something chipper like that... Something really is up with her, I thought. What should I do at a time like this?*

I'm worried about her. But I feel like it's the wrong move to come out and say so directly, especially because Miori always puts on a brave front. If I ask her if there's something wrong, she'll just answer that everything is A-OK. I lacked experience when it came to social interactions, so I didn't know what would be the correct action to take.

I shook myself out of my thoughts for the moment and decided to go with a harmless suggestion. "All right, let's head home."

Miori nodded. "Yeah. Right."

We passed through the ticket gates and boarded our train. It was relatively crowded since it was almost rush hour. However, we still managed to get seats next to each other. The train took off shortly after we sat down. The inside of the car began swaying with a familiar clickety-clack.

Miori said nothing. Just moments ago, she'd kept a smile pasted on her face

when we were saying farewell to Reita and Hoshimiya even though she'd clearly been acting strange. But now that smile was nowhere in sight. She just kept her head down with a glum look on her face.

"Anyway, if Miori's going to let anyone see her vulnerable side, it'll be you. I'm leaving her in your care."

Reita's words from the bathroom flashed through my mind. *He's right. Miori is showing me her weak side right now, I thought. These are the feelings that she didn't show to Reita or Hoshimiya. Though, it's probably not because she trusts me, but because she doesn't particularly care about my existence, so it doesn't matter to her if I'm here or not.*

While I was trying to find the right words to offer her, Miori muttered, "I'm sorry. Plan Double Date didn't go very well, did it?"

Uhhh, really? It didn't? I pondered. *I guess our goal was to get closer to Reita and Hoshimiya. I don't necessarily think we failed, but it wasn't the huge success we'd predicted. It was more of a normal day hanging out with friends, but we all had a good time.*

"I had fun, so I think it went fine. Nothing comes from being too hasty either," I earnestly replied. I tried to convey to Miori that today really *had* been fun through my tone. During my first round as a teen, I'd never hung out with a group of friends, let alone with my crush. *I'm plenty satisfied with today.*

"You're right. Yeah, I think so too," she agreed and nodded vigorously.

Something feels off about her again, I sensed. Unlike me, Miori was not one to be content with maintaining the status quo.

I started to say, "Hey, Miori. I—"

But she cut me off. "I'm fine," she said.

Did she notice that I felt something was off with her? I wondered.

"I'm fine. Everything is A-OK, really. There's nothing for you to worry about," Miori reassured me again, refusing to even let me ask my question.

She was so firm that I couldn't say another word.

Chapter 2: I'll Shelter You When the Rain Falls

When June rolled in, the rainy season came with it.

Outside the window, rain was falling from the sky with a gentle pitter-patter. The continuously dreary days had likewise caused the atmosphere of the classroom to become overcast.

The muggy air made me sweat, and my skin felt uncomfortably sticky. *It's hot, I complained to myself. It's way too humid. This climate sucks! It makes me depressed. The dry weather in the middle of summer is way better than this.*

This is why I hate the rainy season.

I felt like I was coming back to life a little when I fanned myself with my notebook. I couldn't focus on class, so I scanned the room to see how everyone else was faring. My fellow classmates were gazing down listlessly.

The humidity had shot up compared to last week, so everyone had changed to their short-sleeved shirts. Unfortunately, it wasn't terrible enough that we'd be allowed to turn on the air conditioner. *It's actually kind of miraculous, the way we're in this shitty sweet spot for the weather. I hate this!*

I managed to endure until our English teacher finally said, "All right. That's it for today. Make sure you properly review the material," and ended the class, which thankfully brought us to lunchtime.

"Natsuki, let's go eat." Reita invited me to lunch, as always.

"Coming," I said and stood up. I was about to leave the classroom but stopped because something had been bothering me.

"Uta-chan? Are you listening?" I heard Hoshimiya ask.

"Oh, uh, sorry. What were you saying?" Uta replied as if she was snapping out of a daze.

Uta's been acting strange lately. She's obviously much more down than usual. Her energy has been missing for days, and she looks so lethargic. Even someone

as blind as me can tell, so it must be clear as day for everyone else... And I feel like she's been talking to me less and less.

"Hey, Reita," I called out.

As if he'd read my thoughts, Reita asked, "Are you worried about Uta?"

Well, I did stop in my tracks to watch her. I'm sure anyone could tell what I was thinking, not just Reita. "Yup. She's been acting really weird lately. Shouldn't we ask her what's wrong?" I asked.

Reita appeared conflicted, but he gave me an answer after a short pause. "I am worried, but I'm hesitant to force her to talk about something that she doesn't want to tell us."

That's a fair point. I found myself agreeing. "But," I began, remembering what had happened at the pasta restaurant, "considering the timing, don't you think this could be related to Miori's problem too?"

Reita held his chin in his hand as he thought about my theory. "I'll do some investigation. So why don't you ask Uta what's got her so down?"

"Huh? Why me? You'll definitely do a better job of helping her than me," I said. *I'm pretty useless when it comes to giving advice, but Reita might be able to offer something helpful. Is there even any point to splitting up the work between us?* I thought hard as I cocked my head to the side.

Reita looked like he had mixed feelings when he finally answered me. "It's best if multiple people don't press her for answers when it comes to delicate subjects like this. Uta's normally a chatterbox, but she's not telling any of us what's wrong, right? And if she only feels comfortable confiding in one person, then you're the best man for the job. Because Uta..." he stopped himself there.

I knew what he was going to say without needing to hear the rest. Reita's tone and expression implied, *"She's in love with you."*

"Then isn't that... Isn't that even more reason it shouldn't be me?" I asked hesitantly. *I'm in love with Hoshimiya. I can't give Uta the answer she wants to hear. It doesn't matter how worried I am, I don't have the right to intervene in her private life.*

Reita went deep into thought once he understood what I was trying to say. He eventually patted me on the shoulder and broke the silence. “I think if it were me, I’d be happy if the person I liked was worried about me.”

“Okay. I’ll ask her what’s up,” I said after some thought. *This feels like too much responsibility for me, but I’m concerned about Uta and Miori. I want to know what’s going on.*

“I’m counting on you, Natsuki. All right then, I’ll head to the cafeteria,” Reita said.

“Hold on. Where’s Tatsuya?” I asked.

“He went down with Hino and the other guys already.”

“Oh, right...”

The six of us had gotten closer to our other classmates lately. Because of that, we didn’t group up together during lunch or after school as often anymore, much like today. But I set those thoughts aside and parted ways with Reita. I went to the school store to buy bread and brought it back to our classroom.

During lunch, the students moved their desks into groups of around five or six and ate lunch there while chatting. But when I returned, I didn’t see Uta anywhere. Hoshimiya and Nanase were eating with Fujiwara and some other girls.

“Hi, Natsuki-kun. You’re not eating in the cafeteria today?” Hoshimiya questioned after she noticed me in the room, her eyes fluttering open and closed.

“Yeah. I felt like eating some bread for once,” I replied. I held up my bag with the three pieces of bread I’d bought from the school store. “Anyway, where’s Uta?”

Hoshimiya shook her head. “I don’t know. I didn’t even notice her leave.” She looked very worried.

“We’re unsure whether we should look for her because she might want to be alone,” Nanase added. She looked composed as always, but I could hear the unease sprinkled into her voice.

Nanase's right, though. If Uta wants to be alone, searching for her might make things worse. Uta might find our concern annoying and overbearing. Those thoughts made me want to stop trying to find Uta.

Hey, what the hell do you think someone like you could even do? a phantom of my past self asked me.

After mulling it over for a bit, I told the other girls, "I'll go look for her."

I don't know what I'm doing, but there must be some way I can help Uta, I answered my past self. *The "cool me" that I'm trying to become, that awesome guy I conjured up for my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan... If I want to be a protagonist like him, then I can't leave my friends alone when they may be crying. Nothing will change if I just shake in my boots!*

At the very least, I hope being by Uta's side can give her strength.

I knew many places in our school where you could escape to when you wanted to be alone. After all, I'd always been hunting for places to eat lunch alone during my first time in high school. I had plenty of secret spots in my back pocket. No one knew more about being a loner in this school than me.

It was raining, which meant that Uta had to be indoors. I checked the staircase landing by the rooftop entrance, the empty space in the club building where everyone dumped random stuff, and then the empty classroom at the back of the second floor. *Bingo.*

A small figure quivered in surprise when I opened the door to the empty classroom. Uta was sitting on a desk by the window. She looked over to the door nervously, and her eyes widened in surprise when she realized it was me.

"Natsu...?" she asked timidly. "What's up?"

Normally her voice would've been loud enough to reach the heavens, even when taken by surprise. But her tone didn't have its trademark pluck today. She also lacked her usual expressiveness.

"Hey. Let's eat together," I said, raising my bag of bread.

"This is out of nowhere... Were you looking for me?"

“Yeah. I’ll leave if you hate the thought of eating with me, though. It’s up to you.”

“I don’t hate it, but...” Uta clearly looked unwilling.

There’s no point if I back out here, I thought and didn’t wait for a verbal rejection. I pushed a desk and chair from the edge of the classroom over to where Uta was sitting and stuck them right in front of hers. Our desks were facing each other, and I took a seat across from her.

I started nonchalantly eating my bread. Uta looked defeated and took a seat in her own chair.

“Did you eat already?” I asked.

“I wasn’t hungry, so I didn’t feel like eating,” she replied slowly.

“You should try to eat *something* at least. Here, take my yakisoba bread.” I removed the bread from my bag and put it in front of her. She looked reluctant, but she picked it up and began eating.

I’ve never seen Uta act so cold. I feel like this is going to awaken something within me... Whoa, stop right there! Calm down. What the heck am I thinking? Clearly the nerves are just getting to me since I’ve never done anything like this before.

“How’d you know I was here?” Uta asked as she chewed the yakisoba bread.

“I’m second to none when it comes to finding places to hide alone,” I proudly proclaimed.

“Um, even if you try to look cool, what you just said is...” she replied, choosing her words carefully.

“Hey, can you stop looking so disgusted? My heart is made of glass, you know.” I felt quite hurt by the cold reception.

My sulking managed to get a smile out of Uta. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to give you the cold shoulder,” she apologized.

Oh, her tone sounds a bit perkier now, I thought.

“I didn’t think I could eat much because I didn’t have an appetite, but now

that I've started eating, I feel like I could wolf down more," Uta admitted.

"Did you catch a cold or something?" I asked.

"Ah ha ha. No, I'm fit as a fiddle," Uta said with an empty laugh. She was obviously forcing herself to smile.

What's this? I feel sad... This isn't Uta's smile that I know and love so well. What happened to make her like this? Well, that's what I'm here to find out. But where do I even begin?

Silence fell between us as I struggled to find the words to break the ice. The dead air alone was unsettling. Uta usually had infinite topics to talk about when it was just the two of us. We continued to eat quietly. The gentle pit-pat of the rain against the window filled the room. It felt like the rain was steadily picking up as time passed.

Just when I was about to open my mouth, Uta suddenly spoke up. "I actually don't dislike rain."

Her words took me by surprise. *I thought someone physically active like Uta would hate the rain.*

"The sun gets shrouded by the clouds, and the rain keeps people from going outdoors. You know, kinda like the world is shutting us inside. I think it feels a little cozy. I'd get tired if there weren't days like this every now and then," Uta explained.

"I'm not really sure I know what you mean," I said, tilting my head to the side. *That was so poetic that I don't really get it.*

"Ah ha ha. Sorry, I said something weird. I don't usually talk about this stuff," she said.

Her follow-up also surprised me. *Maybe I'm not really, truly seeing anyone. No, Uta said it herself: she doesn't always vocalize everything that goes through her head.* Hearing her say that had thrown me into a whirlpool of my own thoughts. *Looks like I think I have people figured out more than I actually do.*

I decided that now was the time to bring up the question. "Did something happen with the girls' basketball club?"

Uta nodded.

I was right. Something did happen during practice, which means this is likely related to Miori's situation.

"The mood on the team has been bad lately," Uta began. As I'd expected, there was trouble brewing between members of the club. "On the weekends, we normally have practice in the morning and then a few hours of individual training in the afternoon. You're not forced to stay for independent training, but it's kind of the norm... After all, the tournament is coming up."

I listened to Uta speak as I nodded and gave her other little signs encouraging her to continue. *Right, it's already June. The Interhigh prelims are right around the corner*, I recalled.

"So honestly, it feels like we're all being forced to stay behind after practice," she continued.

Ah, yes, peer pressure. It's natural to get fired up for practice around now, after all.

"But Miorin doesn't participate in self-training much. Last Saturday and Sunday, she only stayed for morning practice and then left. Of course, the afternoon sessions are optional, so Miorin hasn't really done anything wrong."

Aha! So this is about Miori. I don't know what she did on Sunday, but she was hanging out with us on Saturday. Miori's not the type to throw herself into club activities, though. Plus, she's still just a first-year. There's always going to be a difference in passion levels between the upperclassmen and lowerclassmen, I thought understandingly.

However, Uta added, "Coach put Miorin on the starting lineup a short while ago."

"What?! For real?" I blurted out and accidentally leaned too far forward on my desk.

It's barely been a few months since the entrance ceremony, and a first-year is already a starter? That's crazy! I knew Miori was good, but... Hmm? Was she a starter during her first year in my original run? Oh, yeah, I think she was. I completely forgot!

“Yeah. And because she’s a starter now, our senpai are angry that she doesn’t seem to have much drive to practice. Miorin’s also pretty strong-willed, so... You know what I mean?” Uta asked.

“Yeah. I think I can imagine what happened,” I replied.

I could clearly envision the older girls on the team saying something rude to Miori, and Miori confidently shooting back her own sarcastic comment, topped with her trademark smile. *Miori’s the type to fight back if you try to start something with her. I bet it blew up into a whole argument. That would explain the awkward atmosphere between her and Wakamura’s group on Saturday.*

Wakamura and the other two girls had clearly treated Miori with animosity, and Miori hadn’t shown them the respect that an underclassman normally would. *Of course Uta would be exhausted if that’s the mood hanging over everyone’s head during practice!*

Words started spilling out of Uta little by little as her train of thought lost coherence. “I don’t know what to do... I-I’m the closest person to Miorin, so I want to help, but the senpai are so stubborn. I can’t do anything.”

“I see,” I remarked. *Uta’s stuck between a rock and a hard place, huh?*

She stared out the window and murmured softly, “Yeah, so that’s why I’ve been drained lately. I don’t like hearing all the gossip either.”

Uta gets along with just about everyone. I’ve never heard her say a mean thing about anyone, ever. She wouldn’t know how to react if she heard someone bad-mouthing her close friend, I thought. She’s not the type to go with the flow and participate in the trash talk, but these are upperclassmen she’s dealing with. She’d offend them merely for trying to defend Miori.

And to begin with, Uta doesn’t have the gall to firmly refute what others are saying. She’d probably just give them a weakhearted smile or something to hide her real feelings. It dawned on me that Uta’s energy had been depleted by circumstances outside of her control.

“I’m sorry. It’s not fun to hear about,” Uta said, distress evident in her tone.

Why are you apologizing? There’s nothing for you to apologize for, I thought and shook my head. “The least I can do is listen when you’re in a bind. And

maybe I can help.”

I can't say I'll fix the problem since I'm an outsider to the issue. Things would only be exacerbated if someone unrelated tried to step in, I reasoned. *But at least she can vent to me about it.*

My intentions must've gotten through to her because Uta said, “Thanks,” and smiled at me. “I'll work harder. I want Miorin and our senpai to reconcile.” She uttered a small, “Hmph!” of determination and clenched her fist in front of her chest, a gesture reminiscent of the energetic Uta I'd been missing.

It looked like she was going out of her way to reassure me, though. “Uta, don't push yourself too hard,” I said.

When she registered my words, Uta looked like she was about to burst into tears for a split second, but she vigorously shook her head, and a familiar smile formed on her face.

“I'll be fine! Improving the atmosphere is my forte!” Sakura Uta assured me with a seemingly cheerful smile.

I'm not directly involved, so I can't solve whatever the issue is. I know that...but isn't there something I can do? I thought. I hated how depressed two of my close friends had been acting lately.

I didn't have work after school today, so even when the classroom had emptied out, I stayed in my seat absentmindedly staring out the window. Since it was still raining, the number of puddles kept increasing. I watched them expand as I ruminated.

There's no point agonizing over it here. I should go see what's going on for myself, I eventually decided and headed over to the gym. However, a lone student who was part of the go home club would stand out observing a girls' club practice, so I climbed up to the walkway (*Is this thing a catwalk?*) that lined the gym wall. I wouldn't stand out too much from there, and people rarely ever looked up.

Our school's gym had three courts that clubs used in turn. Today, the boys' and girls' basketball clubs each occupied one, and the badminton club was on

the third. All of the members from each club were shouting with zeal, likely more so than usual because their respective tournaments were drawing near.

The girls' basketball club was currently having a five-on-five practice match. I didn't need to search hard for Miori because I quickly spotted her playing on the court. Her presence clearly outclassed those of the other nine girls. It only took a split second of carelessness from her opponent for Miori to steal the ball. From there, she made a fast break alone and sank a shot.

Whoa, she's crazy fast. She accelerates so quickly that I almost don't believe she's a girl... But I didn't hear a single person cheer, "Nice!" when she scored. Just as I thought that, I heard the members cheer when a different player's shot went in. Well, this definitely feels like targeted malice.

My face contorted into a displeased frown. Their coach, who was watching from the sidelines in a chair, witnessed the whole thing but remained silent. *Hmm. I can feel their discord emanating all the way from here, so there's no way their coach didn't notice. Is the coach mulling over the situation, or are they the type that doesn't interfere with player dynamics much?* Regardless of what the coach was up to, Uta was watching the players from the bench with a glum look on her face.

During the five-on-five practice match, all of the first-years were either watching from the bench or refereeing the game. The only exception was Miori, and the reason for that was, of course, because she was exceptionally skilled. I could tell from my bird's-eye view that Miori was obviously their best player, their ace, so to speak. She was in no way eclipsed by the second-or third-years on the court. In fact, she looked like she was even better than them. The ability she displayed made it clear as to why she, a mere first-year, had been selected to be a starter.

Man... She's the embodiment of sheer talent itself. It almost makes me envious.

Miori clapped her hands to demand a pass. Her teammates didn't try any funny business like refusing to pass the ball to her, probably because their coach was watching. Miori caught the ball and nimbly drove it towards the hoop. As soon as two defenders moved in to block her, she forced her way past

them and did a clean layup.

It was an excellent play, but Miori just sniffed with a nonchalant expression afterwards. It was a very unendearing gesture—I could understand why the upperclassmen hated her. Wakamura's face twisted in frustration when Miori passed by her.

This looks like a hard problem to solve. I'm sure the upperclassmen are jealous because their starting spot got snatched away by a cheeky underclassman. Well, they're definitely barking up the wrong tree by criticizing her for not participating in individual training time, though, I thought.

I watched for a while until their practice ended. After the coach left, many of the members stayed behind to continue training on their own, Uta included. However, Miori had already disappeared from the court.

"Hey, what are you doing?" a voice asked out of nowhere.

"Aaah!" I yelped in surprise. I turned to find that Miori had somehow gotten next to me. "D-Don't surprise me like that!"

"I'm the one who's surprised. I found someone shady hanging around the gym," she scoffed.

I tried not to stand out, but I guess someone would spot me eventually since I watched their whole practice. "Hey, who are you calling shady?"

Miori shot me a look. "A guy unrelated to the girls' basketball club watches us all afternoon. Wouldn't you call that shady?"

When I think about it logically, I must've looked really creepy staring nonstop at the girls practicing. Panicked by the realization, I lowered my head. "You're absolutely right! I'm very sorry."

She sighed. "Did Uta ask you for help?"

"Nope, she didn't. I was just curious about what was up," I answered honestly.

"I see," she murmured and then turned away from me. "Do whatever you want, just don't get reported to the police."

She's got a point about that, I agreed, but I didn't want to let the conversation

end yet. “Miori—”

She cut me off right there, preventing me from even asking my question once again. “It’s got nothing to do with you,” she said flatly. The atmosphere between us was not welcoming to discussion of this topic.

I hesitated but just said, “You’re the same as always.” *Miori always sticks her nose into other people’s problems, but she won’t let anyone meddle with hers. She’s been like that since we were kids. It’s no wonder she became our brat commander*, I thought. *Well, there’s no point in staying here any longer.* I stealthily left the second floor of the gym and went outside.

Once again, someone called out to me. “Oh, I knew it! I thought I caught a glimpse of you earlier.”

“Aaargh!!!” I yelled.

Uta, who’d been walking towards me as she wiped away sweat, stopped in surprise. “Wh-Why are you yelling? Don’t do that! You surprised me.”

“S-Sorry... Please don’t call the cops on me.”

“Ah ha ha. What are you saying? I wouldn’t do that,” she said gently.

I sighed in relief. Miori treating me like a suspicious prowler had made me more nervous than I’d realized.

“You’re really kind, Natsu,” Uta said.

“Where’s that coming from out of the blue?” I asked.

Uta didn’t reply but turned her attention to the vending machine and bought a few sports drinks. She opened one of the bottles and gulped down its contents in one swig. “Phew! That hits the spot!”

“That was a magnificent chug. Are you gonna drink all of those?” I teased.

“Obviously not! My senpai asked me to get these.” She jokingly glared at me. *Of course not.*

Uta sat down on a nearby bench. “I’ll take a short break here.”

“I can’t believe you’re staying for individual training. You’re really pumped up, huh?” I glanced at the clock. It was already past 7:30 p.m. The other clubs were

starting to clean up.

“All of us are super motivated,” she replied then patted the space next to her.

Is she telling me to sit? I obediently took a seat next to her.

Once I did, she asked, “So, what do you think?”

“What do I think? About what?”

“Our practice. You saw it all, right?”

“Well, I do think what they were doing was pretty devious,” I answered. From what I got out of observing them, the second-and third-years loathed Miori, with Wakamura at the heart of it all. There were also members who looked fed up with it, so not everyone felt the same way. I could definitely tell that the other first-years looked unsure of what to do, just like Uta.

“Yeah...” she agreed. “I think so too. Why’d things turn out this way?”

“Have things been like this ever since Miori was selected to be a starter?”

“Pretty much. A little after that was announced, Miorin and Wakamura-senpai got into an argument because Miorin was about to head home before individual training. The mood has been like this ever since then, and they’ve been isolating Miorin,” Uta explained.

“Did they ever say anything before that when Miori didn’t join in on individual training?” I questioned.

Uta thought for a moment and then answered, “No. Wakamura-senpai and the other upperclassmen just got really hostile towards Miorin out of nowhere and started complaining about her behavior. I was honestly surprised. Wakamura-senpai is usually a really nice person... I thought something must’ve happened to trigger their change in attitude.”

It really is unexpected. Wakamura is a second-year, and she’ll be the captain next year. Sounds like everyone in the club thought she was a relatively levelheaded person too. At the very least, it doesn’t seem like she’s the type to start picking fights for no reason.

“Is it because she’s jealous?” Uta muttered.

“You mean because if Miori weren’t around, Wakamura-senpai would’ve been chosen as a starter?” I asked. *Did losing the starter position change Wakamura? I wonder... Something feels off about that. She didn’t come off as the spiteful type after observing her today. They didn’t communicate during practice, but Wakamura did proactively pass the ball to Miori.* After some speculation, I finally said, “If that’s the reason, then that’d make her and her crew some terrible upperclassmen.”

Of course Miori’s attitude towards her upperclassmen would worsen if that were the case. She wasn’t the type of person to quietly take unreasonable mistreatment, after all.

“Yeah. I think so too. I feel bad for Miorin,” Uta said, the darkness in her expression showing no sign of disappearing. “Isn’t there something I can do?” she whispered.

Right then, I heard footsteps; Miori was walking towards us. She’d finished changing into her school uniform and was wearing her backpack while holding her sports bag. Evidently, she was on her way home.

The gym entrance was in front of the rest space with the vending machines where Uta and I were talking. Miori caught sight of us on her way out and looked over in our direction. Our eyes met, and she quickly looked away. However, she stopped moving.

There was a brief moment of silence wherein all we could hear was the gentle rainfall, and then Miori opened her mouth. “I’m sorry for putting you through all this, Uta.”

“No, don’t be. Miorin, are you okay?” she replied.

“I’m not one to be hurt by this level of harassment. Don’t worry about me,” Miori said and then left.

...She looks like she doesn’t care, but I bet she’s just putting up a front. Still, I’m the only one who’ll notice her bluff.

“I’m fine. Everything is A-OK, really. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Her words from the other day flashed through my mind. It sounded as if she had meant to reassure herself more than anything. *Really, no one realizes that*

Miori's exhausted by all this. Even Uta's convinced that Miori is mentally impervious. She's a good actress, after all.

"Why doesn't she participate in individual training?" I asked Uta as I watched Miori's back gradually disappear in the rain.

"Huh? Isn't it because it's a waste of time to keep slogging on inefficiently after practice is over? There are times when she does stay behind...but less so lately, probably because of the atmosphere."

"That's very like her, but it's not how I'd expect a first-year to behave."

"Ah ha ha. I think so too. But Miorin is super talented."

It's not like Miori's doing anything wrong. But that doesn't mean people will be okay with her just because she isn't strictly in the wrong. People dislike anyone who can't read the room—like me during my first go at high school. However, Miori is different from me; she's attentive and socially well-rounded. That's why this whole situation is strange. Would she really just shrug off such a serious matter? What if there's something else behind all this?

While I was deep in thought, Uta stood up, sports drinks in hand. "I've gotta go back now."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry for taking up your training time."

"Not at all. I'm the one who started talking to you. See you tomorrow," Uta said and ran back into the gym.

Right when she went back inside, a deep voice suddenly spoke up from behind me. "What a load of horseshit."

I turned around. "Tatsuya..." I wondered how long he'd been listening.

He walked up to me and pointed in the opposite direction of the gym. *I guess that means he wants to talk while we walk home. Well, I suppose it is about time to start heading that way,* I thought.

"What about your bike?" I asked.

"I take a bus from the station on rainy days," he explained.

The rain had temporarily halted when we walked outside. However, it would

likely start back up again at any moment, to no one's surprise. The downpour had left behind large puddles here and there which made it hard to walk. I took a big step over the one in front of me.

"I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but I just happened to pass by after we finished practice," Tatsuya said from beside me.

"How much did you hear?"

"I heard everything after you guys started talking about the other members being jealous of Motomiya becoming a starter," he said. "Well, I could've guessed what you guys were talking about without hearing all that. I practice right next to them every day; I've witnessed it firsthand."

Well, obviously Tatsuya would know more about the situation than someone like me.

"It's a bunch of crap, seriously. It's such a stupid thing, and they're hurting Uta because of it," he spat out.

He's really riled up about this.

"What's her name? Wakamura? Should I just give her a good whack on the head?"

"I get that you want to fix the problem, but that's way too barbaric! You'll get suspended for sure."

"...I was just kidding," he said.

That didn't sound like a joke to me.

Tatsuya let out a sigh and looked up at the dark sky. "I know. Nothing'll turn out well no matter what I try." I could tell he'd been worrying about the situation in his own way and had come to the same conclusion as me. "The only solutions I can think of involve brute force. I don't understand how those girls feel, so I can't really say anything... And I can't even make Uta feel better the way you do," he continued to say.

"I don't make Uta feel better either, you know."

"No, you do. I can tell. She hasn't cried yet because you're around," he said with confidence.

Tatsuya's been friends with Uta since middle school. I'm sure he knows things about her that I don't.

"But there is one thing that comes to mind about all this," Tatsuya said as if he'd just remembered something. "Motomiya is definitely skilled, but her play style is too individualistic. It's not like she doesn't pay attention to her surroundings...but it's obvious from the way she plays that she doesn't trust the upperclassmen."

I'd gotten the exact same impression from Miori's plays today.

"I'm home!" I called out.

As soon as I got back, I went into my room and threw myself down on the bed. Changing out of my uniform felt like a bother, so I just kept it on and stared up at the ceiling.

This probably also happened during my first round of high school, I thought. Back then, I'd practically never spoken to Miori, nor had I been friends with Uta. That's why I had no info on this problem. I had been on the boys' basketball club with Tatsuya, but I had no clue about any conflict that the girls' basketball club might've run into, even though I'd practiced on the court next to them.

Welp, it may be my second chance at life, but it looks like I've got no clever way of resolving this issue with my knowledge of the future. I'll just have to do my best with what I've got to work with right now.

But there was something that came to mind. It was a memory of Miori's play style during our third year of high school, one that had happened during the prefectural tournament semifinals. The girls' team was coincidentally playing on the same day as us, so we sat in the audience and cheered for them. I hadn't been interested in the game, but even so, Miori had left a strong impression on me.

"Oh, I get it now... I thought something felt weird while I was watching," I muttered, finally starting to understand why watching her play had been so off-putting.

The Motomiya Miori that I know is actually great at leveraging the skills of

those around her. She didn't used to be a player that focused on her own individual abilities. Would her play style change so drastically in the span of three years? No. Miori stopped acting high and mighty a long time ago. She isn't the type of person to only rely on her own skill, and that's why I sensed something was off. I mean, come on! Personalitywise, she's an expert at using the people around her, which means something happened that caused Miori to stop passing to other people, I concluded.

"She wouldn't give me a straight answer even if I asked her."

So my only choice is to collect information. Right as I thought that, my phone started to ring from over by my pillow where I'd tossed it. I checked the screen to see "Sakura Uta" displayed there.

It's unusual for Uta to call me.

When I picked up her call, I heard rustling noises. "Uta?" I called out tentatively.

I could hear her voice, but it sounded like she was far from her phone. "Hold on a sec! I'm putting in my earphones."

I waited as ordered until Uta's voice came through my phone once again, except it was much clearer than the first time. "Sorry, sorry! You weren't sleeping yet, were you?"

"Nope, I haven't even bathed yet," I replied.

"Good. I was worried about what I'd do if I woke you up."

"Yeah, but it's nowhere near bedtime." I checked, and it was barely past 10 p.m. *It's way too early for bed.*

"Whaaat? I'm usually in bed by now, you know."

"You have practice every day, so you must be drained. I'm in the go home club, no practice to wear me out."

"Well, I guess you're right... But don't you have work, Natsu? Isn't that tiring?"

"I usually work until ten on weekdays, so I can't sleep by then even if I'm tired."

“Huh, really? Don’t you need plenty of sleep to feel energized the next day?”

“Seven hours of rest is plenty for me. I usually sleep around midnight and wake up at seven.”

I thought it was an extremely common schedule, but Uta cried out, “Whaaat?!” in a surprised tone. “You need at least nine hours! Otherwise, you’ll sleep during class!”

“I’m not too sure about that one. Uta, wouldn’t you sleep in class either way?” I’d meant it as a lighthearted joke, but she fell silent for a moment.

“That’s true...” I heard her mumble seriously.

Uh, is it true? You sleep like a baby. “They do say a well-slept child is a well-kept child, and that’s important for you, Uta.”

“Um, Natsu? What’re you trying to say?” she sounded a bit sullen. “I’ve been growing bit by bit lately.”

“Really? That’s great to hear.”

“Hey! I feel like you’re treating me like a kid... Hmph! I’ll be taller than you in no time at all, okay?”

“How much do you plan on growing? Are you going to become a model?”
That’ll make you around 178 centimeters, you know. There aren’t many girls as tall as me. The tallest girl in our class is Nanase, and she’s probably only around 160 centimeters.

“A model? That sounds fun! I can’t wait,” she replied with enthusiasm.

“Whoa there! Exactly how much *do* you expect you’re going to grow?”

Uta was definitely on the shorter side of our class at around 150 centimeters. She’d need to grow almost thirty centimeters to reach my height. *You’ll be a completely different person if that ever happens!*

“Ah ha ha! I was joking, but I really am jealous of your height, Natsu,” she said.

Well, she’s a basketball player, so it must be a serious concern for her. Height was crucial for basketball and a clear advantage to have. Since Uta lacked that

asset, she was limited to certain positions and would always be fighting an uphill battle.

“Just a teensy bit is enough, so won’t you give me some of yours?” she pleaded.

“Sure, but that’ll be ten thousand yen per centimeter,” I joked.

“Wow, that sounds like an excellent deal! I’d buy up every last centimeter if I were an adult!” she exclaimed. I heard her giggle in the background as well as something that sounded like cloth moving around. She was most likely adjusting her blanket.

I’m guessing she’s calling me from bed, in the same position as when she sleeps, I thought.

I heard her yawn. “I’m getting sleepy,” she said. Her voice sounded somewhat laxer than usual.

This is a cute new side to her. It makes me really feel like I’m talking to a girl... Huh?! Is this the legendary “falling asleep on the phone” thing?! Wait, no. Is that outdated? Hold on, it should be relatively new around now... Yeah, but so what? No, no, stop it! Now’s not the time for me to be having a one-man show. I have to keep the conversation going.

“Are you going to sleep now? Should I hang up?” I asked.

“Not yet. Stay on the call until I fall asleep,” Uta replied.

“Uh, I can’t, I still need to take a bath...”

“Then just stay on for a little longer... Hey, can we do a video call?” She casually dropped a bombshell of a request.

“Sure, I guess...” She’d asked so lightheartedly that I agreed without thinking. *Huh? Wait, we’re going to video call right now? For real?!*

Flustered, I tidied up my messy hair. My phone changed from the call screen to displaying Uta in pajamas. Her hair looked fluffier than usual, as if she’d just blow-dried it. She was lying on her belly, arms wrapped around a pillow and her chin resting atop it as she stared at her screen. The phone was likely leaning against the wall.

Uta's face was extremely close. I hadn't turned my camera on yet, but I was already feeling nervous. She looked so different from usual that it made my heart pound. *When she's this close, I can really tell how pretty she is. No, I'm being forced to notice it!*

"Natsu? What's wrong? Hurry uuup!" she rushed me as she kicked her feet up and down.

"O-Okay..."

Uta smiled as soon as I turned on my camera. "Ah ha ha! It's Natsu!"

"Well, of course it's me. Isn't that obvious?" I was so nervous that I felt like my response had come out colder than I'd intended.

"Wait a sec... Natsu, are you nervous?"

She'd hit the nail square on the head. *Am I that easy to read if even Uta saw through me? But I'll be damned if I admit that! I'd better cover it up,* I thought and shook my head. "Nope, not at all."

"Really? Well...I am," she said with her face half buried in her pillow. She looked away out of embarrassment over what she'd just said. "...Because I've never called a boy this late at night before."

I felt my face heat up. "I've never called a girl this late before either," I admitted. I'd called Hoshimiya just once before, but that had been at around eight or so. It felt different to be on a call with a girl past ten at night, and it was a video call to boot.

We both fell silent.

Argh, ugh, this is bad! I feel super embarrassed. I really wanted to roll around on my bed, but I couldn't let Uta witness that. An unbearable awkwardness fell between us.

"Oh, really? Huh, that's unexpected. Oh, but I guess you wouldn't have? Natsu, you just went through your high school glow up, after all. Are you actually not too used to talking to girls?" she fumbled out a jab.

"Shut up! Got a problem with it?" I replied after a moment. Normally, I was the one who teased Uta, but she'd very clearly seized the initiative today.

“Ah ha ha! You’re so cute. Natsu is sooo cute! Heh heh.”

Ah, well, I’m glad she sounds like she’s having fun. It’s been a while since I’ve seen her laugh wholeheartedly like this. “Anyway, why the random video call?”

“Do I...have to say why?”

Uta looked like she wanted to say it, so I pushed her to. “Of course you do.” I’d said that partially as payback for her teasing, but I was also curious as to why she’d called me at this hour.

I’ve never gotten a call from Uta before. She rarely uses RINE in the first place, and we basically never text each other. Though I do message Hoshimiya and Nanase relatively often.

“Um... Because, I wanted to see you, Natsu,” she said in a quiet voice.

Huh? Huuuh?! Wha— Dammit, you... That’s dirty! That has to be a foul. She’d dealt a critical hit, bringing my HP down to zero.

Both of us looked away. We were on a video call, but neither of us could look up. Because we both knew that our cheeks had turned scarlet.

I glanced at my phone screen and saw that Uta’s blush had reached her ears, but she’d also chosen the same time to glance at her own screen. Our eyes met again, and we instantaneously averted our gazes.

The extremely unbearable silence continued. Eventually, I finally managed to break it with a terribly mediocre quip. “D-Didn’t you see my face just a few hours ago?” I managed to wring out of my throat.

“T-True. Ah ha ha, what the heck am I saying?” Uta quickly babbled out. “It was a joke. Yeah, just a joke! Forget I said that.”

You want me to forget it? You’re asking for the impossible again. I wish you’d be more self-aware of how high your attack stat is!

“I-It’s kind of hot in here!” Uta said and got out of bed, leaving my screen. I heard a little *beep* and then a whirring noise. It sounded like she’d turned on her fan. When she returned to the camera, her hair was fluttering in the light breeze. “Aaah! That feels good!”



Right as she was returning to her original position on top of her pillow, my screen accidentally displayed Uta's exposed chest. *I feel like I caught a glimpse of it just now, but let's pretend I saw nothing. Oh, that's right... She's not wearing a bra because she's about to go to sleep...*

"To be honest, I just wanted to cheer myself up," Uta said sincerely while I was thinking wicked thoughts. "It's true that I wanted to see you, though. I cheer up when I see your face!"

After a beat, I said, "If my face cheers you up, then I'll show it to you as much as you want. It's a small price to pay!"

"Ah ha ha, thanks. I think that with your help, I can go to school tomorrow too."

You can go to school tomorrow too? Hmm. She feels cornered enough that she can't bear going to school?

"Wakamura-senpai got mad at me today," Uta mumbled. It sounded like it'd happened after I left. "I asked her why she was so harsh towards Miorin. And I tried to encourage her to have a proper talk with Miorin, but she told me off, saying that I was just another first-year acting cheeky." Uta giggled, but there was no feeling behind it.

She's trying to stick up for Miori, but her position is just getting more and more uncomfortable, I surmised. After that, she gradually began to vent her feelings to me with little cohesion.

Ultimately, Miori's position in the club was weaker than Wakamura's side, which was made up of second-years. In the beginning, there were members who'd just watched while staying neutral, but they were steadily joining Wakamura's side and isolating Miori.

Uta hated that dynamic within the club. She'd summoned her courage to talk to the upperclassmen, but no dice.

"Actually, I called Miorin before you, Natsu," she said, looking forlorn. "She told me not to back her up. That I should stick to everyone else."

That does sound like something she'd say. She doesn't want to get Uta mixed

up in her problem.

“I know she’s probably worried about me... But it makes me sad! Miorin won’t rely on me even though we’re friends.” She sounded like she was kicking herself for her own powerlessness.

After a moment, I asked, “Hey, Uta. Will you tell me about Miori?”

“Sure? But you’re her childhood friend. Wouldn’t you know more about her than me?”

“Describe to me how she plays basketball. She didn’t always play the way she does now, right?”

“Huh? O-Okay...” she said. “Well, she’s too much like a one-man team right now.”

“I thought so... Then, do you know the reason why she stopped passing to her teammates?” I asked.

“Hmm...” Uta thought, resting her chin atop her hands. “Now that you mention it...she did openly stop passing the ball around two weeks ago. But she always scored points on her own, so I didn’t really think too much of it.”

It started two weeks ago, huh? That’s pretty recent. Maybe that’s why Wakamura and the other girls started picking a fight with her. I won’t know anything for sure until I do some more digging, though. But I’m a mere outsider to the problem. It’s hard for me to confirm my theory.

“You have an idea, don’t you?” Uta asked. Her tone was stronger and firmer than before. “I’ll help you, Natsu. So won’t you tell me what you’re thinking about?”

“It’s nothing more than a hunch, though,” I said hesitantly.

“That’s fine. I just hate standing by, doing nothing.”

“All right,” I finally said after thinking it over.

Uta’s help was indispensable if I wanted to do something about this matter. Wakamura and others’ true motives and the reason why Miori was keeping to herself—I had formulated a deduction for what was going on, but I needed to take action to verify it. Miori was my childhood friend, one whom I was stuck

with, so I decided to enlist Uta's help for her sake.

The girls' basketball club was playing in a practice match next weekend. Their opponent was a powerhouse and one of the top eight schools in the prefecture, Karakure High School. This would be the team's last opportunity to make any changes and finalize the starting roster before Interhigh prelims began.

"I'm not even going to make it onto the bench. I'm not good enough yet, so in the bleachers I go," Uta said after she finished outlining the schedule for the girls' team.

"You'll have your chance to show your stuff once the third-years retire," I encouraged.

"Yeah. I'm going to keep training hard!"

It was lunchtime, and we'd finished eating, so Uta and I were talking, just the two of us. We blended into our surroundings naturally, just two students chatting in the hallway with their backs against the wall. But we had an ulterior goal. Uta's eyes kept roaming the halls. I could tell she was thinking, *"Are they here yet? Are they here yet?"*

Hey, now, our cover will be blown if you're too obvious!

"Ah, they're coming," she whispered.

I deliberately didn't turn to check and continued to pretend we were having a pleasant conversation.

"Oh, look, it's Uta. Hey! How's it going?" The second-years from the girls' basketball club, including Wakamura, were walking down the hall.

Of course, this was no mere coincidence. After we'd confirmed that Wakamura and the other girls were eating in the cafeteria, Uta and I had stood in the corridor that second-years had to walk through to get back to their classroom. We stayed there pretending to be engrossed in small talk, waiting in ambush.

Uta's expression stiffened for a moment but quickly transformed into a bright smile to return the greeting. "Hello!"

“I’m sorry about yesterday. I didn’t mean to be so harsh,” Wakamura apologized. Her tone was friendly, but it didn’t sound like a sincere apology.

“O-Oh, it’s fine...” Uta looked like she had mixed feelings about the apology, but she shook her head back and forth.

“By the way.” Wakamura pointed at me.

Hey, it’s rude to point at people!

“Is he your boyfriend?” she asked.

“What?!” Uta’s cheeks instantly turned scarlet. “N-No, he’s not!” she forcefully denied, arms flapping in front of her wildly.

Wakamura and the other girls exchanged looks, and then they each began to speak up.

“But we see you two hanging out a lot recently... Right, girls?”

“Weren’t they together after practice too?”

“Didn’t this guy watch us practice from the second floor?”

Whoever said that last bit, won’t you please forget what you saw?!

“If you’re not dating, then what’s your relationship?” Wakamura asked with a puzzled look.

“Huh? Our relationship? Well, we’re friends.” Uta appeared to be dying of embarrassment as she looked up at me. “We’re friends, right?”

“Y-Yeah. It’s true; we’re just friends,” I said, backing her up. *Your destructive power is overwhelming when you stare up at me at that angle, so please don’t ever do that again.*

“Hmm?” They all shared a look and then started smirking.

“What is it?! Jeez!” Uta’s reaction to their teasing was so overblown that I could feel my own face getting hot. Her attitude could’ve been mistaken for a confession that there actually was something going on between us.

“Well, take good care of Uta, okay?” Wakamura said.

Given the way that she’d asked me, it felt wrong to say no, so I just nodded.

“Why are you nodding?!” Uta exclaimed, though she looked a bit glad.

Don't get happy just because of that! I get it, you're cute! I cried out internally. I chose a safe answer to give. “Uh, 'cause... Wasn't she telling me to take care of you as a friend?”

Uta squinted at me and her cheeks puffed up. “If that's why, then I guess it's fine...”

Excuse me, why do you look displeased by that answer? After listening to our banter, Wakamura suddenly started staring at me hard. *Wh-What is it?*

As if she'd remembered something, Wakamura asked, “Hey, aren't you that guy from Saturday?”

I'm glad you remembered! Looks like the conversation will go as planned without me having to force the subject. I was worried the only thing we were going to get out of our ambush was a teasing.

“Oh, yeah, I've seen you before,” I replied.

Wakamura turned away awkwardly. “I'm sorry. I made things unpleasant, didn't I?”

I was so thrown off by her up-front apology that I didn't know what to say. “No, it wasn't...” I began, instinctively trying to gloss it over, but nothing would change if I did that. I stopped myself and decided to be bold. *It won't be weird if I ask about it now.* “Actually, did something happen between you and Miori?”

I felt the air ice over immediately. The girls went silent and Uta looked at me nervously.

“She flirted with Rika's boyfriend,” the girl with sharp eyes next to Wakamura blurted out.

“Mana, shush,” Wakamura cautioned.

“You don't want people to think we're bullying her for no reason, right?”

I'm guessing Rika is Wakamura's given name, based on that exchange. I haven't heard this bit about Miori before, though. I glanced over at Uta to see if she already knew about this new information, but she shook her head.

“What do you mean she flirted with him?” I questioned.

“It’s like I just said. She was messing around with someone else’s boyfriend.”

Would Miori ever do that? I doubt she’s as used to hanging out with boys as she leads others to believe. Besides, she’s gunning for Reita right now, so there’s no way she’d make a move on another guy.

Uta and I kept silent as Mana continued to explain their side of the story. “There’s more to it than just that, though. Like, she was chosen to be a starter, but she doesn’t participate in individual training *ever*, and she’s got a cheeky attitude... Anyway, we don’t like her, so just stay out of it as much as possible. That’s all.”

“Is that true?” I probed Wakamura after a moment.

She met my gaze but then quickly averted her eyes. “Everything Mana said is true.” She looked unwilling, but she continued to speak. “But what upsets me about her the most is...is that she...”

I have a feeling I know what she’s going to say, so I should interject here. If I’m right, then I can take control of the conversation. I decided to take the gamble and completed her thought. “Is it because she doesn’t play with the team?”

Wakamura looked at me, astonished. *Bull’s-eye!*

“How’d you know?” she asked.

“I could see that much after watching her play,” I replied.

Miori’s play style is conceited, so much so that even Tatsuya and I can tell from afar. I’m sure it’s much more overbearing for her teammates who play alongside her. You know, watching her play makes you think, “Ah, she’s playing basketball alone.”

“Well, yeah, that’s exactly what I think,” Wakamura reluctantly admitted. “Miori’s crazy good, and I know she’s got great court vision, but lately she never passes to anyone. And she just does whatever she wants, even when we should be following our set plays... I hate that! We can’t leverage everyone’s strengths when she’s playing.”

The two girls next to Wakamura looked a bit surprised. *She’s probably the*

type of person who doesn't talk about her feelings much, I reasoned.

"I've pointed it out to her over and over again, but she doesn't improve. I keep inviting her to practice with us after Coach leaves because I want to improve her coordination with the team... She's much more talented than I am, so she could do it if she actually tried, but it's like she doesn't even care. I bet she looks down on us. That's why I've been so annoyed by her!" Wakamura looked frustrated as she spoke. "And then someone saw Miori with my boyfriend, so I asked her what she was doing with him, but all she said was, 'What's the problem with that?' She's unbelievable! I can't get along with her."

The two girls with Wakamura nodded their heads in agreement. *Hmm. Isn't that kind of your boyfriend's fault too?*

"I know it's awful for everyone else. And you, Uta... I didn't want the mood to become like this." Wakamura apologized to Uta once more and then left with her friends.

"Natsu." Uta looked at me, eyes anxious.

"Yeah, this is a tough one," I said. *It doesn't seem like Wakamura's a bad person. This would be a lot easier if there were an obvious villain that we just needed to take down. But most problems in reality aren't like that. People make little mistakes that inadvertently hurt others, and everyone has their own reasons for acting certain ways. Sometimes it's a difference in opinion or a misunderstanding, and then the cause of the problem gets all jumbled up and confusing to pick out.*

That's why we can't solve a problem with a single magic bullet like they do in books or movies.

"But I'll do whatever I can to help," I told Uta. *I'm not a hero in a fairy tale, so the only thing I can do is carefully unravel the tangled threads. At the very least, I'd like to clear up any misunderstandings between them.* "I understand what Wakamura is thinking now. Next, we need to figure out what's going on inside Miori's head."

During lunchtime the following day, I poked my head into the classroom next

door. It was alive with chatter.

“Haibara-kun, do you need something?” a girl standing by the entrance asked me.

I’ve seen her around before, but I don’t remember her name...which feels bad because she clearly knows mine. This has been happening pretty often lately, and oh boy, is it awkward every time! Ah, whatever. Anyway...

“Can you call Miori for me?” I asked her.

“Okay!” She walked towards the middle of the classroom where Miori was.

Miori had been smiling at the center of the girls in her class, but when she noticed my presence, her smile blatantly transformed into an annoyed look. For some reason, the girls around her started getting excited. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Miori walked over while saying something like, “I told you already, we’re not like that! I don’t know him by choice.”

She sighed. “What do you want?”

“We’ll stand out talking here, so let’s go somewhere else,” I replied.

After thinking for a moment, she agreed. “Yeah, true. I don’t want any rumors about us starting either.”

“What do you mean?” I cocked my head to the side.

Miori pinched my cheeks when I did. *Hey! That hurts, you know!* I scowled in protest which caused her to let out another sigh.

“People who are unaware of how much influence they have on others are so aggravating,” she complained.

“I’m not *trying* to be unaware...” I muttered. After the incident with Tatsuya, I was now fully cognizant that everyone was greatly overestimating me. *Well, this is my second round of life, so I am a little bit more capable than the average high school student.*

She sighed a third time. “It’s fine. There’s nothing *wrong* with that. Also, your tie’s crooked.” She looked exasperated, but she reached her hand out to fix it. “Stay still.”

Her tone left me no room to say yes or no. Miori fixed my tie without waiting for my permission. It wasn't a good idea to disobey her when she used that tone, so I stayed still and let her fix it.

Our height difference is really apparent when she's this close. Miori was taller than me when we were kids. While I was reminiscing, I heard shrill squeals from the girls behind me. I glanced in the direction of their cries to see that the group of girls Miori had been chatting with were watching us, eyes twinkling. All of them were covering their mouths with their hands.

"Oops." Miori looked like she realized she'd messed up and then dragged me out of the classroom by my arm. She led me away and only let me go once we'd gone far enough. "Ugh, I lose my rhythm when you're around!"

She's been in a really foul mood lately. Look, she just sighed again. That's four times already! When she's with other people, she keeps up the happy smile, but when it's just me and her, she immediately starts sulking.

"So? Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the gym."

"Huh?! Why do we have to go all the way there? If you just need to talk to me, then here should be fine."

We had gone a decent distance from her classroom, and although we were still in the hallway, there weren't many other students walking around. If our purpose had just been to talk, then this place would've sufficed. But I had no intention of solely having a little chat with her; I'd chosen the gym for a reason. *Knowing Miori, she won't give me a straight answer if I ask her normally.*

"Don't sweat it and just follow me," I said.

Miori hesitated. "You're being awfully pushy. For you, anyway."

"Yeah, well, I just wanted to give you a lesson."

"You? Give *me* a lesson? On what?"

"Basketball."

"Huh?" Her face scrunched up in confusion. I could tell she was thinking, *"What the hell is he saying?"*

Well, I'd think the same thing if I were her. Miori followed me nonetheless, albeit reluctantly. We walked side by side to the gym. Once we arrived, I took off my indoor shoes and stepped out onto the floor in my socks. The gym was open for everyone to use during lunchtime, but there usually weren't many people around because it was so far from the classroom building. Today, only one other person was around.

And that person was only here because I'd asked them to come to the gym.

"Oh, you're here! I brought your gym shoes, Natsu!"

"Thanks, Uta." I took the bag with my gym shoes from Uta. *I wish I had basketball shoes, but I had no reason to buy any this time since I'm not in the basketball club.*

"I also brought Miorin's basketball shoes from the clubroom!" she exclaimed.

"Th-Thanks... But why are you here too, Uta?"

"I dunno! I'm just here because Natsu called for me."

Miori shot me a puzzled look.

"I wanted Uta to be the ref," I said matter-of-factly. I finished putting my shoes on and then opened the gym's equipment room. I picked a random ball out of the basketball cage, tossed it over to Miori, and stood in front of her. "Let's play, one-on-one."

"Are you serious? You've never even played basketball before." She was not enthusiastic and looked taken aback by my proposal. It was a natural reaction since she had no idea what I wanted out of her.

"Miorin, don't worry! Natsu is really good!" Uta assured her.

"I heard about what happened at the Spor-Cha, but even if you claim he's good, you mean he's good for an amateur, right?"

Miori was my childhood friend, so she knew I'd never played basketball all throughout middle school. That was why she was doubtful even though Uta was vouching for me. However, this was actually my second round in life. I had skills Miori didn't know about.

"No! Natsu is actually *really* good!" Uta insisted.

“Yes, yes, Uta. I understand what you’re saying.” Miori shrugged.

She doesn’t seem down to play, so it’s time to rile her up, I thought. “Well, I don’t mind you running away if you don’t think you can beat me.”

She huffed and glared at me. “You really piss me off. Don’t complain when I crush you, okay?” I’d successfully turned Miori’s competitive spirit into my ally.

“A plain old one-on-one wouldn’t be any fun though, right?”

“So that’s what you were aiming for. You want something out of me if I lose?”

It was helpful that she was quick on the uptake. I nodded. “If you win, I’m all yours. You can do whatever you want with me.”

“Um, no, I don’t want that...”

I almost fell over due to her fast reply. Uta’s hands flew over her mouth, and she timidly asked, “Y-You’ll be hers? Natsu, that’s very bold of you...”

“I didn’t mean it like *that*! I just meant I’d be her lackey or something!” I explained.

“I don’t care what you meant; I don’t need someone like *you* around,” Miori said.

“Hrrk!” Her remarks were like daggers, and it felt like I’d just been stabbed twice in quick succession, causing me to freeze up. *N-Not bad... You’ve got some fight in you, but I can still throw down!* I pulled myself together. “But if I win, then—”

“‘You’ll be mine!’ Is that what you want to say? Sooo pushy...” Miori’s face turned a little pink and she hugged herself.

“No!” I yelled. *Come on, don’t let her throw you off!*

“If I win, then you have to tell me everything that’s been weighing on your mind!” I declared.

Miori blinked at me in wordless surprise.

“I told you to rely on me. Don’t keep everything to yourself.”

“Why? This has nothing to do with you,” she said slowly.

“I knew you’d say that. That’s why I went out of my way to challenge you to a match,” I said. Behind my words, I implied, *“If you lose, you’ll talk honestly, right?”*

Miori glowered at me. “Fine. Your plan’s ruined if I win anyway.” A humph escaped from her throat, and then she started dribbling the ball.

She’s being obstinate right now, so this is the only way. Well, drastic measures are always the best way to get through to her.

“All right, then. You ready?” she asked.

“Come at me,” I replied.

With that, Miori and I kicked off our one-on-one.

She thinks I’m a beginner, but that’s old news. Plus, I’ve got the physical advantage as a boy.

Miori charged forward, but I read her move. I extended my arm and smacked the ball out of her hands.

“What?!” she exclaimed.

I grazed her hand, so I think that’s a foul, I thought, but our helpful referee, Uta, did an outward sweeping motion with her arms and yelled, “Saaafe!”

Um, isn’t that for baseball? Ah, well...

Miori’s brows were furrowed with confusion. We switched sides, and now I was on the offense.

“That... That was luck, right?” she questioned.

“You’ll see if it was luck or not soon.” I began to dribble slowly. The ball bounced up and down rhythmically and fit perfectly in my hand. I saw the look in Miori’s eyes change.

I started with a crossover and nimbly stepped in with my right foot, but it wasn’t enough to sidestep Miori. I suddenly stopped and did a reverse dribble to spin the other way. I extended myself to the left this time, but I still couldn’t shake her off.

Is this really the agility of a girl? I knew it wouldn’t be easy winning against a

first-year good enough to become a starter...but I'm not done yet! I forced my way past with the ball in hand and leaped into the air using all the momentum I could gather.

Miori jumped as well, trying to block my layup, but as she did, I pulled the ball back to my body. Right when I was directly below the hoop, still airborne, I raised the ball again and tossed it up with a strong flick of my wrist to give it enough spin. The goal was behind me, but I could approximate where it was without needing to look.

“What the—?!”

It was a clean double clutch. Miori's form crumbled from surprise, and she fell down. The ball went through the hoop at the same time that her butt landed on the floor. I looked cool as a cucumber on the outside, but in actuality I was secretly sweating bullets.

Th-That was close... I would've looked so lame if I'd missed! That was really lucky. I don't even need to ask myself whether it was luck or skill; that was one hundred percent a fluke. The basketball gods are on my side! I regretted my confident act, but Miori didn't seem to have noticed my panic.

She was still sitting on the floor and staring at me, dumbfounded. “H-How can you...?”

“Giving up already? I only scored once,” I said, provoking her.

She slapped her cheeks and stood up. “Did you go as far as to practice basketball for your high school debut?”

“Yeah, something like that.” I couldn't think of a good response, so I just let her keep the misunderstanding. *Well, based on what Miori knows about me, it's not like there's a better guess.*

“I still won't lose, though,” she said.

We switched sides again. Miori's expression was serious now, and she dropped her knees low with the ball in her hands. *Looks like she's giving it her all now. I know she's really strong. Not gonna lie, but I didn't think she was going to be that hard to shake off! Somewhere inside of me, I was underestimating her because she's a girl, but it's time to wake up. She's much*

better at defense than Tatsuya.

“Oh, yeah, we never agreed on any rules. How about first to three wins?” I asked.

Miori nodded.

“Well, there you have it,” I said.

In the end, I’d been the first to score three points, with a final score of three to one. Miori was honestly much stronger than I’d anticipated. It felt like I’d scored every point by a hair’s breadth.

She had her hands on her knees as she tried to calm her ragged breathing. “Haah... Haah...” she panted.

“It’s my victory. Now, as promised, you have to rely on me!” I guffawed loudly. I was feeling especially wired because my opponent had been Miori.

She finished catching her breath. “Do you want me to rely on you that badly?” she asked as she wiped her sweat off with a towel she’d borrowed from Uta.

“I don’t particularly *want* to be relied on, but lean on me anyway.”

“You know that doesn’t make sense, right?”

“Hey, you’re the one who’s been meddling in my business!” When I’d been depressed about Tatsuya, Miori had been the one to help me.

“*What’s wrong, Sir First-Place Prodigy?*” she’d asked.

When I was standing outside in the pouring rain, Miori had raised an umbrella over my head. *You were there for me, so if you’re in trouble, then I’ll stick my nose in even if you don’t want me to!*

“That was because...I’m your partner for your grand plan,” she countered.

“I can use that reason too, y’know,” I said.

Miori desperately began shaking her head. “I asked you to help me with things related to Reita-kun. That doesn’t include my everyday problems. It wasn’t that kind of agreement. That’s why there’s no reason for me to depend on you at all—”

I interrupted her before she could go on. “There is. Aren’t we friends?”

Hey, Miori... You say we’re childhood friends by unfortunate chance, but I didn’t talk to you once in my first round of high school. In my original time, we didn’t have that kind of relationship whatsoever. You and me being friends—that’s a story from long ago...which is why, now that I’ve regained our friendship, I want to cherish what we have.

“Friends, huh?” Miori murmured.

I didn’t know what I’d do if she denied that. It definitely would’ve hurt, and I’d likely feel down in the dumps. I’d probably skip school, go home, and mope in my bed for the rest of the day. Thankfully, as I’d hoped, Miori did not object and remained silent. Evidently I wasn’t the only one who thought we were friends again, and I took comfort in that.

“Now, start talking. Spit it all out! If something’s bothering you, then let’s brainstorm together.”

Motomiya Miori is a meddlesome person who likes to help others yet never relies on anyone else. But I’m here to change that. I’ll teach her that she’s got me around now.

“This isn’t a problem that’ll go away if I ask you for help,” she said after some hesitation.

“But maybe I can do something, just like how you helped me back then.”

Uta, who’d been silently listening to our conversation until now, chimed in. “Me too! I feel the same way. I want to help you, Miorin. It makes me sad when you don’t rely on me.”

We were the only ones in the gym, so it fell silent along with us.

After a while, Miori finally spoke up. “I was probably scared.” Her tone was self-deprecating. “Relying on other people means showing them your weakness, after all. I don’t want to show anyone my weaknesses. I’m not actually a strong person, but I wanted to appear that way.”

She looked up at me with a fragile smile.

“Simple. Just show them your true self.”

Miori said that to me, but it turns out she’s been carrying similar worries around with her... No, it’s because she had similar worries that she could give me the correct answer—since that’s what she actually wants to do. All right, then. It’s my turn to help Miori, just like how she helped me!

“Miori, you don’t need to act tough in front of me,” I said. I didn’t think words would be enough to convey how I felt, but I needed to express my emotions to her. So I took a step forward and got closer to her.

“Natsuki?” she questioned.

I mustered up all my courage and hugged Miori. I’d never dare do this to another girl, but I managed because she was my childhood friend. She didn’t resist my embrace but timidly wrapped her arms around me.

“Ew, you’re just a virgin. You must’ve used all your guts for this.”

“I told you. Stop acting tough.” I lightly smacked her on the back of the head.

“I’m sorry,” she said, tone miserable. “Hey, Natsuki?”



“What?”

“I’m having a really hard time right now. Maybe I’m getting my just deserts, but it’s still painful.”

“Yeah.”

“Is it okay...if I rely on you?” Her voice trembled with each word.

“Of course,” I quietly replied as I held her close.

Now then... There’s a problem. When am I supposed to let go? What would all the men of the world do here? This is my second round of life, but this is the first time I’ve ever hugged a girl, so any so-called future experience is out the window. I mean, I just let my emotions take the wheel! I’m baffled as to how this happened... Dude, what are you doing? I asked myself.

We were both hugging each other in silence. I could feel Miori stirring slightly in my arms.

My thoughts were racing. It feels like Miori’s calmed down too, so I guess it’s about time to separate, but I’ll look cold if I let go of her without any warning, and that would suck! Also, she feels kinda soft, and I’m very aware that I’m touching a girl right now, and she smells good, so I low-key don’t wanna move away. Not that I can say that out loud— Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on there! What the heck am I thinking? This is Miori we’re talking about; get ahold of yourself! Seriously, man, calm down, okay?

I heard Miori sniffle quietly by my ear and felt her breath against my neck.

Wh-What do I do?! Aaah! I’m getting really nervous. Crap, I can feel my heart pounding! While my mind was running amok, Uta was staring at Miori and me. At first, she’d been watching over us with warm eyes, but the warmth was slowly losing its heat and instead becoming colder and colder. *Wh-What’s wrong?*

No, more importantly, what am I supposed to do in this kind of situation? How did I end up hugging Miori while Uta’s staring daggers at me? I had no idea what was going on. All I knew was that this was the result of my actions.

“You can let go now. Uta’ll get mad if you don’t.” Miori gently pushed me away.

Thank you for the cue. You’ve just saved my life!

“I’m not mad or anything. It’s just... Don’t you think that was a bit too long?” Uta stared at us hard.

I was unsure of what the correct response was. “Yeah, maybe it was a bit too long,” I fumbled out sheepishly.

Miori turned to Uta and put her hands together apologetically. “Uta, I’m sorry. It’s because Natsuki likes me.”

What the hell is this girl saying?! She was crying moments ago, and now she’s acting like nothing happened. Uncute as always. I let my nerves get to me and lost myself there! Wait, no, I wasn’t nervous or anything... Whatever, at least she’s recovered enough to put on the cheerful act again.

I noticed Uta still glaring at me for reasons unknown. *Again, why me? Shouldn’t you be glaring at Miori now?*

“Didn’t you say I could depend on you? A man doesn’t go back on his word, right?” Miori said.

“Why does your question sound more like a threat?” I asked.

“I *am* threatening you. Once I start relying on you, you can’t turn around and say, ‘Nah, just kidding, I’m done.’ Got it?”

“I’m not going to say anything like that.”

“Never, ever. Okay?” She paused and then, as if the words were spilling out of her uncontrollably, said, “You won’t abandon me again, right?”

Surprised, I looked at Miori. She was referring to what had happened between us in middle school. I was jealous of her back then and shut her out of my life. At that point in time, I was a gloomy guy and a spineless coward who was always alone. I couldn’t stand being around Miori, who shone brightly in the spotlight, surrounded by people, so I avoided her.

I’d told her, *“You shouldn’t hang out with someone like me!”*

For me, that was a memory from almost ten years ago.

“Even though I act like it’s nothing, I was actually really nervous when I talked to you the morning of our entrance ceremony,” Miori admitted.

But for her, the memory was only two or three years old.

“I didn’t want you to notice, so I tried really hard to act like we used to.”

I had hurt Miori, but by this point I’d nearly forgotten that. Or more accurately, I had never imagined that she would be hurt by what I said. That’s why it had never even crossed my mind to think about what Miori was feeling while she spoke to me.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m over it. Because now we can chat like we used to again.” She gently picked up the ball that had been rolling around. “And you told me I could rely on you.”

Miori stared at the worn out ball and, little by little, began to tell us the details of what had transpired between her, Wakamura, and the other second-years.

“I was overjoyed when I was chosen to be a starter. I thought my skills had been recognized. Okay, well, it definitely did go to my head. I thought, ‘I’m still only a first-year, but I made it on. I’m pretty awesome!’”

Miori shot a three-pointer from where she stood. The basketball drew a beautiful arc in the air and then swished through the hoop without touching the rim.

“But, I think around two weeks ago? I was about to go home after practice ended when I realized I forgot something, so I went back to our clubroom. When I did, the door was open, and I overheard our senpai talking.”

“Don’t you think she’s been acting cocky lately?”

“I can’t believe she’d assert her opinion like that just because she was chosen to be a starter. She’s still fresh out of middle school!”

“Come on, guys, you’re going overboard... Though, I do think she’s too cheeky sometimes.”

“She’s usually a good girl!”

The ball bounced on the ground and rolled back to Miori’s feet.

“At that point, I wouldn’t say they were bad-mouthing me yet. I even heard some people stick up for me, and it’s true that I was in over my head back then. I thought their opinions were valid.”

Uta looked torn, but she stayed quiet and listened. *That probably reminded her of some unpleasant memories*, I guessed.

“In the moment, I didn’t *feel* like I was hurt by their words... But during practice the next day, I’d think, ‘Oh, these people don’t like me deep down,’ and then I couldn’t bring myself to pass to them. Even when I was in a situation where I should pass, I started forcing my way past the defense instead.”

Miori picked up the ball once again and passed it to me this time. The ball flew right to my chest, but it came a beat slower than I’d expected. I could sense her hesitation from that pass alone.

“And then Wakamura-senpai got upset with me. She told me, ‘You’re not even trying to be a team player.’ I wanted to fix it too...but I couldn’t pass the ball to anyone at all. I was trying my best, but Wakamura-senpai kept indiscriminately berating me, so I accidentally talked back to her. I said, ‘I’m scoring points, so what does it matter?’ Now I don’t talk to our senpai much because of that.”

Her voice gradually began to shake as she spoke. The feelings that she’d kept contained for so long trickled out with her words.

“And then the final blow happened last Friday. It was the day before we went to watch the movie together. I was already feeling uncomfortable at practice then, so I didn’t participate in individual training and left... But then I got tangled up with an upperclassman from the soccer club.”

Miori cast her eyes downwards and began rubbing her face with her sleeve.

“He was someone who’d talk to me occasionally. On that day, he invited me to walk home with him. I was a little scared, but I selfishly thought that since he was in the soccer club, if I became friends with him, maybe I could get closer to Reita-kun... So I walked to the station with him.”

“And that guy was Wakamura-senpai’s boyfriend?” Uta asked.

Miori nodded. After that, someone had spotted the two of them walking together and Wakamura caught wind of the rumor. Hearing that Miori had been skipping out on self-training time to seduce other people’s boyfriends, Wakamura went directly to Miori and pressed her for an answer. Miori told her the truth at first, but Wakamura trusted her boyfriend and refused to believe her.

That’s why, in the end, Miori had become irritated and said, *“What’s the problem with that?”* As a result, the two of them got into an argument, and that’s how we’d reached our current dilemma.

Silence blanketed the gym after she finished telling the whole story.

“I see,” I said after a while. “Um, then, isn’t Wakamura’s boyfriend bad news?”

That’s truly disgusting behavior, I thought. He’s got a girlfriend already, but he’s hitting on another girl? That’s outrageous enough, but let’s say—for the sake of argument—he got permission from his girlfriend to do that, and he chose to make a move on an underclassman who’s in the same club as his girlfriend?! Whatever train of thought led him to do that freaks me out! Why in the world did he think he wouldn’t get caught?

“Well, that’s true, but Wakamura-senpai is convinced that her boyfriend is a good guy,” Miori reasoned.

“Well, that just means she’s got shit taste in men,” I retorted.

Uta awkwardly looked away and said, “Honestly, I do think Wakamura-senpai does kinda...”

“Come to think of it, wasn’t her ex a delinquent? I remember her saying he used to hit her a lot,” Miori added.

She and Uta looked conflicted, and then both of them smiled bitterly.

“What do you think I should do?” asked Miori.

“Hmm...” I uttered. *Wakamura wouldn't listen to her side of the story with the way things are right now. I mean, Miori already failed to get through to her once. Then what is the correct decision...? I can see the answer! First, we need to get the atmosphere between them back to the point where they can talk normally. In other words...*

“Right now, you've got to get over your, uh, 'can't pass to others' syndrome,” I told her.

She hesitated. “Yeah, you're right. I know I can't stay like this forever.”

There was a possibility that this wasn't something she could solve easily. It would be significantly harder to cure if her symptoms turned out to be something like a case of the yips.

I passed the ball to Miori. She caught it and passed it back to me. We repeated this multiple times to practice basic passing. Her passes were filled with uncertainty at first, but she soon returned to her normal form.

“I think I can do it if I'm passing to you, Natsuki.” Miori let out a sigh of relief.

Uta piped up. “Then what about me?” She spread her arms wide to request a pass.

“Of course I can pass to...you...Uta...” Miori tried to pass the ball to Uta, but there was an unnatural delay to her throw. “Huh? Wh-Why?” The pass itself was nevertheless successful, and it somehow managed to reach Uta's chest. “Th-That's weird... I was doing just fine with Natsuki. Sorry. I'm sorry, Uta!” Miori looked frightened about something as she repeatedly apologized to Uta.

This is a serious psychological injury! And I fear it might be getting worse. I don't think she was this bad when I observed her during practice. Is Miori's trauma intensifying the more her relationship with her team declines? She did say she couldn't pass the day after she heard them gossiping about her behind her back.

Uta gently passed the ball back to Miori. “It's fine; don't worry about it,

Miorin! I'm on your side." She said each word with care, trying to reach Miori's heart with her own sincere feelings.

"Yeah, thanks. I know... I know you are!" Miori nodded over and over and took a deep breath as if trying to shake off the terror haunting her.

This isn't like Miori. It's the most vulnerable I've ever seen her. To be fair, she did admit she didn't want to show us her weak side. Plus, she's trying to overcome adversity right now. In that case, I'm here to push her from behind.

Miori took her time and passed to Uta. Uta caught the ball and then returned it to Miori. The two of them repeated this back-and-forth many times over. I also joined in, and the three of us scrupulously passed the ball between ourselves.

Miori could pass to me without issue, but her passes were a little off when her target was Uta. However, with each successful pass, she grew more confident. And with each repetition, her movements became smoother and smoother.

"Okay, I think I've got it now," Miori murmured, relieved.

"Now you just need to pass the same way to your senpai," I said.

She hung her head and muttered, "I don't know if I can, though." Then she paused and looked at me. "Natsuki."

"What?"

"Do something about this," she said with pleading eyes.

It's hard to say no when I'm the one who just told you to rely on me, but there's only so much I can do here! "You know this isn't a problem that I can magic away by saying something to them," I told her.

"Yeah, you're right." Miori knew she was asking for the impossible and meekly nodded. "Why the heck am I so scared? All they did was talk a little smack behind my back..."

Humans naturally fear being hated by others, and Miori knows she's hated, so she's instinctively frightened. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just... Miori normally behaves like she's mentally impervious, so no one on the girls'

basketball team would notice that she's succumbing to that very fear.

"I want to be strong enough that I don't care what other people think." The words trickled out of Miori's mouth like raindrops falling from the sky.

I wished I could quietly raise an umbrella over her head before she was completely soaked by those forlorn little drops. At the very least, I wanted to be there for her until the rain clouds hanging over her heart cleared.

"Then I'll support you so you can stand strong."

Just like how you supported me so I could look cool for the rainbow-colored youth I've been dreaming of.

"In return, you don't need to put up the tough act in front of me. You can whine, complain, whatever—I can take it all." I pounded my chest. "Lay it all on me!"

Miori blinked in surprise. "You're just lame old Natsuki, so why're you trying to act all cool? Aren't you embarrassed?"

"Hey, shut it! Obviously, you saying that is what's gonna make me feel the most embarrassed!"

"Aren't you always embarrassed anyway? Like, just as a human?"

"As a human?!" I yelled out in shock.

She giggled softly and then brought her lips close to my ear so that Uta couldn't overhear. "Does this mean that our partnership will continue from here on out?"

"We've just added an additional term to the clause. Not a big addition, so yeah."

She giggled again. "Look at you, acting cool... And you're actually pulling it off. Thanks, Natsuki!"

If you smile at me like that at point-blank range, I'll unwittingly become captivated by you!

But before I could fall any deeper in, Uta's low voice snapped me back to reality. "I feel like...you two are off in your own little world."

"W-We're definitely not! Right, Natsuki?"

"Y-Yeah, that's right. We want your help too, Uta!"

Miori and I tried to put Uta back in a good mood, but she wasn't cheering up. "Honestly, I'm not going to be much help with fixing Miori's can't-pass syndrome," I said. This is a matter of her heart, after all.

Miori looked at me with anxious eyes. Faced with such a timid look, I almost wanted to keep up my cool guy act and say, "*I'll do something about this!*" But I knew an outsider like me couldn't intervene in their club activities, so I made eye contact with Uta, who was pouting hard.

"Uta, can I leave Miori to you?"

"You guys need me? But won't you two be fine without me?"

"I'm counting on you to back her up when I'm not around," I said, pointing at Miori.

Oddly enough, Miori turned away. "Stop treating me like you're my parent or something! It's super embarrassing."

Uta chortled at that, and her pout transformed into a broad grin. Her usual smile had returned, and she cheerfully declared, "All right, if you put it like that. Miorin and I are besties, so I'll help you out!"

Hearing her one-sidedly proclaim the two of them as besties, Miori's lips loosened up into a small smile of her own. "When did we become besties? Not that I mind."

As she finished saying that, the school bell rang, echoing throughout the campus. It signaled that lunchtime was ending in five minutes. *Oops, we talked for too long!* Getting back to our classrooms from the gym would take a good while.

"Oh, fudge! We're gonna be late!" Uta cried.

"Run, Uta!" Miori yelled.

The two girls rushed to the gym entrance, changed into their indoor shoes, and dashed off, leaving me behind. *It's a relatively far walk, but we have five whole minutes. You didn't need to panic so hard... Ah, whatever. They looked like they were having a good time.*

I strolled over to the door and started changing my own shoes. As I did, someone spoke up from off to the side. "I'll do something about Wakamura-senpai's boyfriend."

My hands flew up with a start, sending the shoe I'd been holding flying. "O-Oh, hey, Reita. Can you not appear out of nowhere?"

Recently, Tatsuya and Reita have been sneaking up on me without any warning, and it's going to give me a heart attack one day!

Reita glanced at my stupid face. He ignored me and continued talking. "His name's Kurano Masato. He's my senpai in the soccer club. I've always thought that he was a shallow guy. I heard he started dating Wakamura-senpai a while ago, but apparently he's pushy and makes moves on other girls."

Aren't you being kinda frosty right now? I thought. "How long have you been here?"

"From the very beginning. I knew you and Uta were up to something."

Reita began walking off, so I hastily grabbed my gym shoes and followed after him. *Wait a sec... Does that mean he saw Miori and me hugging?* I was mortified. *Crap! Sorry if this puts a damper on your plan, Miori.* The mood seemed too heavy to try and give an excuse as to how we'd ended up in each other's arms. Reita had seen the whole thing from start to finish, but he hadn't even teased me like he normally would have.

"So, what exactly is this 'something' you plan on doing?" I asked.

"I've got a few ideas," he replied flatly.

Uh, he doesn't look very happy.

"I'll make sure he doesn't get involved with Miori any further," Reita bluntly said.

If the Reita says it, then I don't think I need to worry about it.

After our little meeting, ten days remained until the practice match with Karakure High School. Miori got into the habit of messaging me concise daily updates.

"Thanks to you, I've been feeling a bit better."

"Uta's back to her cheerful self again."

"I'm going to do my best. I want to find a compromise with my senpai."

"I passed to Wakamura-senpai today."

"I feel like I'm slowly getting back into the swing of things."

Every time she did, I'd respond with something simple to encourage her. *"Really?" "That's great." "Nice going." "Sounds like you're working hard."* Uta was also helping out, so Miori was gradually starting to pass more.

Finally, the day before the practice match arrived. I received a RINE message from Miori that simply said, *"I think I got this. I'll try my best."*

That's a relief, I thought as I read her message. My pondering was interrupted by the doorbell. *It's already 11 p.m. Who the heck is visiting so late at night?* I huffed internally but didn't move from my bed.

Instead, I yelled my little sister's name. *"Namikaaa?"* The door next to my room opened noisily.

"Just get it yourself," she complained, but I heard her walk downstairs to answer the door. My dear little sister was as admirable and reliable as always! For the record, our mom was already asleep, and our dad wasn't home because he worked in Tokyo.

Come to think of it, considering how late it is, I should be the one who answers. With that thought, I leisurely got up from bed, but then I heard Namika yell, *"Huh?!"* She sounded surprised, so I panicked and ran down the stairs to our front door.

She was holding her hands over her mouth in excitement. *Phew! I don't know what's going on, but at least she doesn't look like she's in danger.*

Namika beckoned me over. “C-C’mere! It’s Miori-senpai!”

Huh? Miori?! Why’s she here? Confused, I moved closer to the entrance, and just as Namika had said, Miori was standing there in her casual clothes.

“What’s up? Why’re you here out of the blue?” I asked.

Miori looked embarrassed and hesitated for a moment. “Never mind why... Can we talk outside for a sec?” she asked, then quickly turned back outside.

“H-Hey! What are you and Miori-senpai to each other?!” Namika asked. “I knew you two were friends in elementary school, but I thought you guys stopped talking in middle school! I mean, I get why she wouldn’t wanna have anything to do with you: unlike her, you’re a downer to be around!” She looked extremely worked up.

“Oh, shush. Don’t hit people over the head with the truth,” I said, trying to calm her down before I followed after Miori.

I lived in a residential area, so no one was walking around at 11 p.m., and the streets were completely silent.

“You shouldn’t be out this late on your own! It’s dangerous,” I scolded. Though being out late was nothing new to her, this was much later than normal. *I know Miori’s got club activities and all, but it’s nearly midnight. Her parents must be worried sick.*

“Sorry.”

“I’ll walk you home. You can talk about what’s bothering you on the way.” I began walking, and Miori obediently followed next to me.

But she didn’t say a word, so I initiated instead. “Miori?” I questioned. *She must want to talk about something.*

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t really have anything I want to say in particular. I just wanted to see you.” She sounded more dispirited than usual.

Huh! Really? She has nothing to say... She just wants to see...me? “Huh? What, are you in love with me or something?” I asked after I’d fully digested her words.

“Wow, you’ve become way too overconfident lately. Of course not, you

moron!”

“You’re the one who told me to have more confidence...” I grumbled. A smile crept across Miori’s face when she saw me acting down. “Anyway, why’d you ring the doorbell? You could’ve just called me.”

“You’re right. Why didn’t I do that?” she wondered aloud. “Tee hee,” she giggled while lightly tapping a knuckle to her head as if to say, “*Silly me!*” Then she commented, “Ha ha, it looks like Namika’s found out about our relationship.”

“It’s not as if there’s anything between us that we need to hide, but it’ll be a pain if she gets the wrong idea.”

Miori ignored my statement and changed the subject at her own discretion, as usual. “I haven’t seen Namika-chan in a hot sec, but she’s gotten really cute! Do you think she has a boyfriend?”

“Of course not. She’s only a second-year in middle school!”

“I wonder about that,” Miori replied mischievously.

“Hey, cut it out! You’re making me nervous.”

She shot me a look. “I didn’t know you had a sister complex. What a riot,” she teased.

Ha ha. Very funny, nice joke... Sh-She’s joking, right? My sister can’t have a boyfriend yet. It’s way too soon for her!

While I was starting to fret about my little sister’s relationship status, Miori changed the topic again. “Hey, can you do me a favor? Can you come to our practice match tomorrow? You just need to stay for the beginning. That’s plenty,” she requested quietly, her voice trembling oh so slightly.

I heard she regained her ability to pass the ball and is back to normal, but she must be nervous about performing in a real game. That’s probably why she showed up here all confused. I told her to depend on me, and she believed in me.

“Sure, I’ll come be your cheer squad,” I said. *If just being there will bolster your confidence, then of course I’ll do it.*

The corners of Miori’s eyes softened with relief—my feelings had reached

her.

The next day was Saturday, and the only thing I had scheduled was work in the afternoon. So I showed up at school using that as my cover story.

The girls' basketball club was having a practice match with a powerhouse, Karakure High School. Parents and friends of the players had shown up to spectate the game. *I shouldn't look out of place this time with all these folks around!*

I climbed up to the second floor. I'd arrived after the players had finished warming up, right before the match was about to start. The teams each did their pregame huddles and then sent their five starters onto the court. And of course, Miori was one of our five. *Oh, there's Wakamura too. Did she successfully snatch up a starter position?*

"Huh?" I said to myself. Miori was acting strange, peering around the gym restlessly. Our eyes met.

Looks like she was searching for me. At least she's realized I'm here. Miori stuck her tongue out at me, trying to get a reaction out of me. *Oh, grow up! I came here for you, remember?* She looked like she'd settled down, so I felt at ease for the moment.

My eyes fell to the players on the bench. Uta was waving at me, trying to be stealthy so no one around her would notice. Her wave then changed into an okay sign. *Is she telling me not to worry? All right, then! I'll relax and enjoy the game.*

The referee threw the ball in the air to kick off the game. Our team won the tip-off and were on offense first. Miori was on the right side of the court and caught a pass when she reached the opponent's three-point line. She dribbled the ball towards the goal and pushed past Karakure's defense. Their center moved to cover Miori, but right as she did, Miori passed the ball without looking.

This looks good. Our center caught it. No one was guarding her, so she easily shot the ball in from right under the hoop. "Oooh," I heard both teams' benches

buzz with surprise. Karakure's players were purely impressed by Miori's skill, whereas Ryomei's players were likely shocked that Miori had passed the ball at all. Our center who'd received the pass looked a little shaken up.

"Miori..." I heard her say.

"I'll pass the ball," Miori replied simply, and ran back to their side of the court for defense.

Next up was the opponent's offense. Our girls took their positions for a zone defense and skillfully suppressed Karakure's attack, causing their offense to stagnate. Taking advantage of their lapse in concentration, Miori swiftly intercepted a pass. With the ball in hand, she made a fast break to their side of the court, but our opponent was a powerhouse for a reason. They quickly returned to defend, forcing Miori to the side of the court. She was close enough to the goal, so she acted like she was about to take a shot, but when the opposing players tried to block her, she quickly bounced the ball to the other side of the court—

—right to where Wakamura was running.

Wakamura swept up Miori's beautiful pass and effortlessly made a layup for another two points. *Nice, she's passing so well! Looks like her syndrome is a problem no more. Far from it, that was a perfect pass.*

"Nice pass!" Wakamura raised her hand up towards Miori. Miori flinched but timidly brought her own hand up and they high-fived. "Let's win this game!"

That was all Wakamura had said, but Miori gazed at the hand she'd just high-fived with for a moment. "Yeah!" she yelled and enthusiastically nodded.

The two teams took turns fighting for the ball, and it changed sides over and over.

"Let's calm down and take the point back!" Miori instructed. Karakure had just scored, putting Ryomei behind.

The upperclassmen on the team looked conflicted about receiving orders from a first-year, but Wakamura wordlessly supported Miori's play, so no one argued otherwise. *They looked awkward in the beginning, but as the match plays out, everyone is getting more and more in sync. Their team plays look*

great with Miori as the pillar.

“Nice one, Miori!”

“Don’t worry! Shake it off! We’ll make the next one!”

The girls were giving each play their all, and through those efforts, their hearts were connecting as a team. Although there’d been some misunderstandings, now their true feelings were being conveyed by playing basketball together.

Miori set a screen to create space for Wakamura and then quickly moved towards the goal for a pick-and-roll. “Wakamura-senpai!” she called out.

Wakamura flawlessly passed the ball straight to Miori. She caught the pass and in one beautiful fluid motion shot the ball into the hoop. This time, Miori held up her hand to Wakamura.

“Nice one!” Wakamura returned her high five with a bright smile.

The whistle blew, signaling the end of the game. The final score was seventy-three to seventy-one. It had been a close match, but Ryomei came out on top. Miori looked up at where I was standing and raised her fists triumphantly.

“Nice job,” I cheered. Her lips curled into a contented smile. *Looks like I don’t have to worry about her anymore.*

All right, time to go to work. There’s no reason for me to stick around here. Not only is there no point, but if I stay too long, people will think I’m somebody suspicious! With that latent fear in my mind, I left the gym and walked towards the school gate.

But right as I stepped out of the door, I ran into Miori, Uta, Wakamura, and the other upperclassmen, facing off in front of the gym. I panicked and hid just before anyone noticed me.

“I heard from Reita-kun. It was true that Masato pushed you to walk with him, wasn’t it?” Wakamura said.

Masato? Oh, right. That’s the name of Wakamura’s boyfriend. Miori nodded awkwardly. *But, man, Reita took action fast. That’s our guy!*

“I’m sorry for not believing you, Miori.” Wakamura lowered her head.

Miori looked uncharacteristically flustered and unsure of how to respond. “N-No, it’s fine... It was my fault. I lost my temper and cheekily asked what the problem was, so of course you’d misunderstand!”

“Heh heh heh... That’s true!” Uta blurted out without thinking.

“Uta?!” Miori cried out in shock.

Uh, Uta, weren’t you supposed to be on Miori’s side? Ha ha...

Wakamura’s serious expression relaxed. She looked up at the sky and said, “I broke up with him already. Next time, I’ll definitely find someone dreamier to date!”

The other upperclassmen surrounding her exchanged worried looks. Evidently, it was well-known that Wakamura had poor taste in guys.

“Um, then... Can I say something?” Miori asked. Her voice was shaking.

“Of course, go on.” Wakamura and the other girls nodded kindly.

Miori began to detail the whole course of events to them, the same way she had told Uta and me. Wakamura and the other upperclassmen listened quietly. Once Miori had finished her story, the girl next to Wakamura was the first to speak up.

“So you heard us... I’m sorry.”

She’d been with Wakamura when Uta and I had ambushed them in the corridor. *I think her name was Mana? Is she apologizing because their bad-mouthing was the impetus that caused Miori to stop passing?* It sounded like Mana and a few other second-years had been in the locker room on that day, but Wakamura hadn’t been there.

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s true that I was in over my own head and—”

“No. That’s no excuse for what we said. Of course you’d be thrilled. You *should* be thrilled—you were chosen as a starter, after all! We’re the ones in the wrong here.” Mana was struggling with her words a bit, and her head was hanging down, but I could hear her clearly enough. “We were jealous of you, Miori... Having an inexperienced first-year easily overtake us in skill made us

frustrated, and we took it out on you. So...we're sorry."

The other second-years also lowered their heads apologetically. Miori only got more flustered and frantically tried to get them to raise their heads.

The sight caused Wakamura to giggle. "An inexperienced first-year? No way! You're not giving Miori enough credit."

"Urgh," Mana groaned. It sounded like she'd taken some psychological damage from having that truth forced on her.

"I-It's true, though. It's only been two months since I joined the club," Miori said with a strained smile.

Completely ignoring the mood, Uta started cackling loudly. "Ah ha ha!" She was holding her stomach and laughing her heart out.

Seeing Uta's exuberance, Miori and the upperclassmen all loosened up. They shared a knowing look and shrugged their shoulders. "*Oh well,*" their expressions said.

After witnessing their reconciliation, I stealthily left the scene, trying not to get spotted. I looked at the sky above. Up until yesterday, it had been overcast, but today it was one vast, blue plain without a cloud in sight. This morning, the weather forecast had announced the end of the rainy season was near.

The dazzling sunlight shone down on us. Summer was calling. *I don't think it'll rain again for a while.*

Chapter 3: Wish

“Too hot...” Tatsuya moaned. He was languidly slumped over his desk.

“You okay?” Hoshimiya asked as she fanned him with her notebook.

“Well, it’s definitely summer,” Nanase said while gazing outside the window.

I looked out at the sky too. The heat waves exuding from the sun were visible to the eye. Amazing. The weather was beautiful, but I had a feeling that if we didn’t get air conditioning soon, we’d turn into barbecue. We were sweating bullets just sitting in our classroom.

Today was already July first. But despite that fact, we still didn’t have permission to turn on the air conditioner.

“Apparently it’s over thirty degrees Celsius today,” Reita informed us.

“Seriously? How the hell are we supposed to get through this without turning on the AC?!” I replied, trembling in fear.

Right then, Uta opened the door to our classroom and romped in. Once inside, voice full of energy, she announced, “Guys! They said we could turn on the AC!”

“Yes! Finally!”

“I thought I was going to die...”

“Why didn’t they just let us turn it on in the first place? Are they trying to kill us?!”

“This school’s definitely slow at making decisions.”

Various cheers and complaints filled the room, all of which I could agree with. *Looks like we’ll be living to see another day, for now.*

Uta had gone to negotiate with the teachers directly. She walked back to our group and puffed up proudly. “Mwa ha ha! Aren’t I the hero right now?!” A lovely smile like a flower in full bloom formed on her lips.

It made my heart race. I turned away from her, trying to conceal my palpitations. After we'd resolved the trouble plaguing the girls' basketball team, Uta's cheerful vivacity had returned.

I feel like earlier in our friendship, seeing her smile would've given me peace of mind, but nowadays I find myself...enraptured by it. And here I thought I was well aware of her cuteness from the get-go! She's super adorable lately.

"Hmm? Natsu? What's wrong?" Uta peered at my face and tilted her head cutely to the side.

"Nothing's wrong. Thanks, Uta," I replied after a moment.

"Yooou're welcome!" Her lips melted into another bright smile, and her cheeks flushed slightly.

That was an expression Uta showed only to me. *Not gonna lie...but I'm charmed. Something inside my heart is changing. Ever since we solved the problem with the girls' basketball team, it feels like Uta and I have gotten closer. She makes suggestive remarks all the time, and she doesn't even try to hide her crush. Even someone as thickheaded as I am can tell she's into me! I'm still not used to girls, so please cut me some slack!*

"Oh, looks like the teachers finally turned the AC on," Reita remarked.

"It feels so nice! I'm never leaving this spot ever again!" Hoshimiya exclaimed.

"Hikari. You'll get sick if you stay there. Don't let the AC hit you directly with cold air," Nanase chided her.

"Ah ha ha! Looks like things are getting lively!" Uta yelled energetically.

"I-I'm alive again..." Tatsuya moaned.

Now that the air conditioner was on, a cool breeze blew through our classroom that had been hot as hell moments ago.

Tatsuya, who'd been withering away, slowly sat up. "I think I can get through the afternoon classes now."

"But we won't have AC going during practice, remember?" Uta piped up.

"Ugh, don't remind me! I'm gonna get depressed."

I watched the two of them banter. Nanase, who was next to me, murmured, “Oh, yeah, it’s almost Tanabata.”

I looked over to the bulletin board that she was staring at. Posted there was a flyer advertising Maebashi’s celebrations for Tanabata, also known as the Star Festival. Featured on the page was a picture of a small bamboo plant decorated with colorful strips of paper that had wishes written on them. A schedule was included underneath.

The festival would be open from 10 a.m. until 9:30 p.m. and last four days, from Thursday, July fifth, until Sunday the eighth. Downtown Maebashi would be blocked off, and traffic would be regulated. There would also be various stalls with games, food, and more. Maebashi’s Tanabata festival was one of the bigger ones in the North Kanto region.

Uta noticed the flyer that Nanase had been reading, and her energy shot up even more. “Oh, you’re right! Yay! It’s festival time!”

“Festivals seem right up your alley, Uta,” I commented.

“Yeah! I love their atmosphere!”

Of course. Uta at a festival? Sounds like that’d give her an energy boost.

“Well, her parents own a store that runs during the festival,” Reita explained.

“What? Really?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded. “Yeah! They run an okonomiyaki shop!”

This is the first I’ve heard about that, but it does fit her image.

“Our okonomiyaki is really tasty, you know! You’d better come try some, okay? Sometimes I even help out!” She whipped out her phone and showed me the store’s location on a map.

“Good idea. Why don’t we all go next time?” Reita proposed, trying to pull her back on topic.

“I’m down! I absolutely love okonomiyaki!” Hoshimiya accepted immediately. The rest of us nodded in agreement.

“Oh, right! We’re going to open a stall during the festival!” Uta exclaimed.

“Really? I’ll have to drop by,” I said.

“Thanks for your business!” she replied as if she were a shop clerk.

Tanabata festival, huh? I definitely can’t miss that for my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan. I mean, it sounds like it’ll be full of youthful energy! Don’t festivals just scream “youth”? That was the only reason I wanted to go. Youth energy was a very important factor.

By the way, the last time I went to a festival was when I was in middle school. I’d gone alone but quickly lost the will to persist after being thrown around by the crowd, so I promptly returned home. Got a problem with it?

In the past, I was so jealous of the guys who were on dates with girls in yukata that I almost went bald with rage. But that’ll be me this time. I’ll invite Hoshimiya to the festival, and we’ll dress up in yukata for a fun date!

While I was feeling giddy by myself, Nanase spoke up. “Festivals really aren’t my thing... They’re too crowded.”

“Yeah, I’m in the same boat as Nanase-san,” Reita said in agreement. “I don’t mind ordinary crowds, but *festival* crowds are suffocating. I’m sick of them.”

They both nodded together. *Yeah, I feel that. It doesn’t look like Reita and Nanase want to go, but I wonder how Hoshimiya feels. I won’t force the subject if she doesn’t like them,* I thought and looked over to her.

My eyes met hers, and after a moment she asked, “Natsuki-kun, are you planning on going to the Tanabata festival?”

How could I let her beat me to the punch? I’m so slow, I admonished myself internally. “I want to go, but I don’t have any plans yet,” I replied innocuously.

She looked sad as she spoke her next words. “I want to go too, but my family has plans this weekend.”

“Oh, that’s too bad...” On the inside, I was drooping forlornly, but I acted normal on the outside.

I see... So I can’t go to the Tanabata festival with Hoshimiya... No, wait. Even if she didn’t have family plans, who knows if she would’ve gone with me. If I’d asked her to come with me alone, she still might have turned me down. When I

invited her to the movies, it sounded like she wanted to avoid being alone with me too. Though, I hope that I'm just reading into it too deeply... All things considered, it might be too early for me to ask her out on a date, anyway. It's probably a good thing I realized all this before she could turn me down. No need to rush—our relationship will progress over time.

"So, where are you going with your family?" I asked.

"Kanagawa. We're visiting my mom's family."

"Wow, Kanagawa, huh? That's pretty urban."

She laughed. "They live in western Kanagawa, so I'll be in the countryside."

It's still gotta be better than Gunma, though... I mean, come on! We've even been called "the realm of ghosts" before.

"I want to do some shopping in Yokohama too. I'm sad I can't go to the festival, but I'm excited for my trip. Oh, I'll buy you a souvenir, Natsuki-kun!"

"Whoa, really?" *Not everyone? Just...me, Natsuki-kun? Ohooo... Oh, man, I think I'm gonna start grinning like a moron!*

While Hoshimiya and I were chatting, Uta and Tatsuya talked next to us.

"Uta, are you going to the festival?" he asked.

"I have to help out with our food stall, so of course I'm going!" she replied.

"I see. I have practice on those days, so I can only show up after we're done."

"Me too. I'm going to be tight on time Friday, but I think I'll have more time Saturday or Sunday after practice!"

I was curious as to where their conversation was heading. It felt as if both of them were carefully feeling each other out. And it looked to me like Tatsuya was waiting for the right moment to invite Uta to the festival.

On the same day Tatsuya and I had gotten into an argument, he'd told Uta, *"I won't give up."* She knew how he felt about her but had given him no further response after her first rejection.

"Saturday or Sunday, huh?"

"Yeah... I think?"

Uta loved festivals, but she didn't ask Tatsuya to go with her. At this point in time, even if Tatsuya mustered up the courage to invite her, her answer seemed obvious. He got up from his seat, perhaps because he'd noticed how conflicted Uta looked.

"I'm going to the bathroom. Let's go, Natsuki."

"Huh? Uh, I don't really need to go though," I answered.

"C'mon, just go with me."

"What, do you love going to the bathroom with me or something?" I complained. Tatsuya ignored my remarks and forced me to go with him by slinging his arm around my shoulder and pulling me along. *I guess this is fine. When he's like this, he's probably got something important he wants to talk about.*

We left the classroom and walked down the hall towards the boys' bathroom. Tatsuya opened up once he'd determined we were far enough away. "Natsuki, you better not reject her because of me."

"Are you talking about the festival?"

He nodded, clearly working under the assumption Uta would invite me. Perhaps he'd already sensed what was going through her head after seeing her reactions.

After a beat, I said, "She might not invite me either."

"Yeah, well, don't feel too bad if that happens. I don't know if she'll be brave enough to, but..." He hesitated for a moment. I glanced over at Tatsuya. His expression was grim. "If you turned her down because of me...I'd feel bad for Uta."

His tone was earnest, and I didn't know what to say in return. *I dunno... But even if Uta invites me to the festival and I go with her, I'd think about Tatsuya constantly in the back of my mind. He's already boldly declared he's in love with her. I can't just ignore who my friend likes... All the more so now that I'm a little bit attracted to Uta.*

"Anyway, I'm telling you not to worry about what I said before," Tatsuya told

me.

The reason he had distanced himself from us weeks ago was because he'd been jealous of me. Now he was apparently trying to reassure me that I didn't need to worry any longer about his feelings from back then.



Wow, this guy can actually be attentive and considerate. I think my heart might just skip a beat! Maybe.

“Also, you’re the reason why Uta’s been back to her old upbeat self, right?” Tatsuya asked. His tone sounded less like a question and more like he was just seeking confirmation, but he was wrong either way.

“I just lent her a hand. That’s all,” I said in denial.

“I doubt that’s true, but I couldn’t even do that much.” He looked frustrated.

I’m sure you were searching for a way that you could help, though, I thought. “I could only help because I’m friends with Miori who was heavily involved with the issue. If I weren’t friends with her, I couldn’t have done anything. Plus, Miori and Uta did pretty much everything on their own in the end.”

Tatsuya didn’t say anything in response. We walked the rest of the way to the bathroom in silence and then turned back the way we came. He halted right before we reached our classroom.

“Even if what you told me is true, that doesn’t change what I wanted to say,” he said. The door to our classroom was open, and we could see Uta and Hoshimiya laughing together by the window.

“She’s finally happy again. I don’t want to see her sad for a while,” Tatsuya murmured as he watched Uta. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Well, the rest is up to how you feel about her,” he said and then entered our classroom ahead of me.

I couldn’t move from that spot. *Tatsuya probably meant every word he just said. He cares more about Uta’s feelings than his own; he’s a great guy. But is he really okay with that? Isn’t he just forcing himself?* An indescribable feeling of unease rumbled through my mind.

When I had gone to see the movie with Hoshimiya, Miori, and Reita, I’d wondered, *Can ideal friendships and romance coexist?* And I’d just recently witnessed how jealousy could be a devastating blow for ruining relationships and causing all sorts of trouble.

If I’m forced to prioritize one or the other...then I’ll likely choose friendship

over romance. I'm happy enough with my high school life as it is right now. Yes, I want a girlfriend, and I'm in love with Hoshimiya. And I can't deny that I feel attracted to Uta, but I don't want to put love first and destroy my friendships.

Besides, I think about having a girlfriend and all that, but I don't have any real-life experience. I'd rather protect what I already have than try my hand at something I know nothing about. But will I ever regret it if I choose to maintain the status quo instead? I already asked god, if they could grant me one wish, to please give me a chance to redo my youth. I'm here right now because that wish was granted. Regrets from my high school days will never go away, and I don't want to have any hanging over me this time. I want to live the rainbow-colored youth I've always dreamed of... Just what should I do so I don't have any regrets?

I couldn't come up with an answer alone, and it wasn't a topic I could discuss with Tatsuya. *I want to see Miori*, I thought wholeheartedly.

That day after school, once everyone left for their club activities, I sent Miori a RINE message.

Natsuki: Are you free after practice?

Miori: I've been attending individual training these days so I'm pretty busy

Her reply was blunt, perhaps because she'd sensed that I wanted to ask for advice.

Natsuki: Ah well, next time

She read it as soon as I sent it, and then a stream of texts followed.

Miori: Fiiine, can't be helped

Miori: Slip out tonight and meet me at the park near my place

Miori: I'll lend you an ear

Though I'd already told her we could talk some other time, she sent me an okay anyway. *That's Miori for you! Of course, I'm grateful for her help.* I sent her a sticker to indicate I agreed with the terms. *She's probably referring to that park where I ran into her on the morning of our entrance ceremony while she was walking her dog.*

"All right," I muttered aloud.

Time to head to work. Nanase isn't on shift today, so it'll just be me and the manager. I'm on the clock until eight, but I probably won't meet up with Miori until at least after nine... My parents won't mind if I stay out late, but Miori's will probably worry. Such thoughts floated through my mind as I looked at my phone. Suddenly, I felt the warmth of someone's touch against my neck. With a start, I turned to see Uta up in my face, close enough that our noses were almost touching.

"Ah ha ha! Did I getcha?" she asked happily.

"Yeah you did," I replied. "Don't surprise me like that."

"Sorry, sorry! I can't help it, Natsu. Your reactions are hilarious!" She took a step back as she continued giggling.

"Didn't you go to practice already?" I questioned.

She responded after a split second. "I'm going soon! But before I went...I wanted to ask you something first."

Something she wants to ask me? I've got an idea of what that could be. My earlier conversation with Tatsuya came to mind. "What's up?" I asked, pretending not to know. *She's probably trying to feel out how much I've guessed already.*

"Erm..." Uta was acting uncharacteristically nervous, fidgeting around a lot as she fumbled for words. "Well, um, do you want to go to the Tanabata festival with me?"

She'd purposefully chosen a time when the others wouldn't be around to ask me, and though I understood what that meant, I felt the need to clarify.

“Me...and you? Just the two of us?”

“Yeah. Just the two of us... I thought it’d be nice for us to go alone together,” she said to clearly state her intentions. She looked shy but maintained eye contact with me.

I couldn’t avert my eyes from her straightforward gaze, but I was unsure how to reply. Silence fell over the room; the only noise to be heard was the buzzing of cicadas outside.

The sun was still out, but it was gradually turning a deep crimson as it sank in the sky. The afterglow of the sunset illuminated Uta’s profile. Her short hair fluttered around in the tepid summer breeze, and then she fixed it with her fingers.

I can’t give her an answer the way I am right now. This is what I wanted to discuss with Miori. But my mouth moved on its own, abandoning my judgment for instinct. “Sure,” I spontaneously agreed.

Uta looked like my acceptance came as a surprise. Her eyes blinked rapidly as she hesitantly asked, “Really? You’ll come?”

My mind was made up so I nodded. That smile as radiant as a lovely flower again bloomed across Uta’s face. It was a look that I was very fond of. Then, realizing how obvious her reaction was, she hurriedly covered her face with her hands and turned away from me. But even with her back facing me, I could still tell that her ears had become bright red.

“O-Okay then! I’ll send you the details later, okay? S-See ya!” she stammered and then whooshed out of the room at top speed.

After she left, I flopped over on my desk in the empty classroom. I didn’t need to check a mirror to know that my face was as red as Uta’s had been. Why else would my cheeks feel like they were on fire?

“Her destructive force is too powerful...” I murmured.

In that moment, declining her invitation hadn’t even felt like an option.

After work, I took a bath and then headed to the park. I was dressed casually

in a white T-shirt and shorts. They were nothing fancy, but I was just seeing Miori, so I figured they'd suffice. The sun had set already, so the stifling heat had dissipated. I didn't mind summer nights since I could comfortably go out in whatever clothes I happened to have lying around. I leisurely strolled down the street and reached the park before long.

When I arrived, Miori was already waiting on a bench, idly kicking her feet back and forth as she gazed up at the sky. Like me, she was dressed casually. I walked up to her and she smiled, noticing my presence.

"Oh, you're wearing glasses! Haven't seen that in a hot sec," she said.

"I removed my contacts because I took a bath." I brought my hand up almost defensively and touched the sturdy rim. I lifted the black frames off my nose, instantly blurring the world around me.

I had terrible vision; it was so terrible that I would've had trouble going about my daily life without any aid. Miori snatched the glasses out of my hands and put them on.

"Whoa, these are really strong! You can't see a thing without 'em, huh?"

Man, Miori gives off a different vibe with glasses. She looks like a diligent pupil who'd be on the student council...is what I would say, but my vision is so fuzzy that I can't see a darn thing!

Once Miori had her fill of messing around with my glasses, she put them back on my face. *Hey, too close, I say!* She leaned in until she was at point-blank range and peered at my bespectacled face.

"Mm-hmm. You don't look too shabby even when you're wearing glasses. You kinda look like a cool scientist."

"You think so? I thought I looked like an otaku, so I switched to contacts."

"Maybe contacts are best day-to-day, but I think you'd look good if you wore glasses every once in a while! It's a different vibe compared to your normal appearance—people'll eat that gap right up. And you'll come off as an intellectual! Take it with a grain of salt, though; I'm used to seeing you in glasses, after all."

I nonchalantly hummed as I listened and took a seat next to her.

“It doesn’t sound like you’re very interested in my wonderful analysis.” Miori shot me the stink eye.

Well, sorry. I’ve got a more important topic to discuss.

“Sheesh... Okay, so? What’d you want to talk about?” Her voice and expression were gentle, but she was way too close.

Is it just me, or has Miori been acting nicer ever since her basketball troubles were resolved? I didn’t do much, but I guess she might feel like she owes me. It should be a positive thing to be on Miori’s good side, but it’s somehow unnerving instead!

“It’s about Uta...” I recounted what Tatsuya had told me, all about Uta’s invitation, my thoughts on the ideal balance between friendship and romance, how I didn’t want to regret my youth, and so on and so forth. I told her everything I’d felt throughout the day. I still couldn’t tell her about how I’d actually leaped seven years back in time, but besides that, I divulged everything.

Miori listened carefully, nodding and giving me small verbal cues to continue. Once I’d finished unloading, she said, “What’s the problem? Tatsuya-kun already gave you his approval, so it’s fine.” She didn’t bother beating around the bush. “If you turn her down, then you’ll be throwing his consideration out the window. Plus, didn’t you say yes to Uta because you actually want to go with her? Then just go have fun!”

“Is Tatsuya really going to be okay with that, though?” I questioned.

“I don’t think you need to worry about Tatsuya-kun. I’m sure he put a lot of thought into it on his own before coming to you, so if you overthink it, then he’ll get the idea you don’t trust him.”

I agree with what she’s saying. But I... At least right now, I don’t think I like Uta in that way. I still have my heart set on Hoshimiya. I can’t deny that I’m drawn to Uta, but will it really be okay if I half-heartedly go on a date with her? Would Uta and Tatsuya really tolerate that? Ugh, what am I thinking now? I already agreed to go with her on an impulse!

Seeing me fret to myself, Miori interrupted my thoughts in a gentle tone.

“You said you don’t want to regret your youth, right?”

“Yeah, but if I lose my friends because of all this, won’t I just be full of regrets?”

“I’m sure it’ll work out,” she assured me. Her words sounded awfully optimistic. I turned to face her, and she was staring at me with her feet up on the bench as she hugged her knees. “You managed the first time there was trouble with Tatsuya-kun, and you helped me out too. You’re surrounded by compassionate people, so I don’t think you’ll be losing anyone with the way you are now.” Her voice was filled with warmth, her words kind.

It sorta gave me the heebie-jeebies. “The way I am now? You mean it?”

“Yep. You need to be more confident!” She smacked my back and stood up.

“Ow...” I complained.

Miori ignored my pain and began walking away as she hummed cheerfully. “I want some ice cream. Let’s go to the convenience store!” She continued onwards without bothering to check whether I was following her or not—there wasn’t a shred of doubt in her mind that I would tag along.

Jeez. She’s always like this, I thought but followed her anyway. I bought a Garigari-kun, one of those classic soda-flavored popsicles, and Miori picked a small carton of Super Cup brand ice cream for herself.

When I asked her why she went for that brand, she replied, “Y’know, other brands are the same price, but I feel like Super Cups are bigger.”

Are you a kid? I thought, internally scoffing at her reasoning. We ate our frozen treats as we walked home. I hadn’t had a Garigari-kun in a long time, so it was mouthwateringly delicious. Just biting into one made me feel so refreshed.

“It feels like summer’s here, you know what I mean?” Miori asked between bites of her ice cream.

“Yeah, which reminds me. Miori, are you going to the Tanabata festival?” I’d been one-sidedly telling her my problems and hadn’t even asked what her own plans were.

“I’ll be there, probably. I might go with Serika.”

“Serika?” I questioned.

“My classmate. We’re real tight. You’ve met her before—remember that girl who was at the study session with me?”

“Oh, yeah. The fashionable blondie, right?” I recalled. Contrary to what one might’ve expected based on her appearance, she had actually been very diligent during our study group. I didn’t remember her at all from my first run through high school, so I’d never interacted with her before. “You’re not gonna go with Reita?”

“I brought it up, but he said he didn’t really like festivals.”

“Right, he did say that today...”

“Yeah, so I didn’t push it. But that aside, maybe I’ll have fun observing your purehearted date with Uta. I heard it’ll be hella crowded, so who knows if I’d be able to spot you guys, though.”

“Please don’t... I’ll die of embarrassment.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to go out of my way to search for you two. But remember: festival dates come with the risk of other people seeing you. I bet tons of our classmates will be there. If they catch you and Uta alone, they’ll obviously think you two are dating. You’d better be mentally prepared for what’ll happen after that!”

That’s... That’s sound advice! It’s very likely rumors that Uta and I are dating will spread.

“I bet Hikari-chan will wonder what’s going on between you guys too,” she continued.

“That’s true... I guess life do be like that sometimes.” *I think she’s already wondering what’s going on, to some extent.*

“Well, all you have to do is deny the rumors if she asks... But who knows? Maybe you two will end up dating,” Miori said with a giant smirk. I didn’t react and just walked along quietly. Peeved that I’d ignored her, she slapped me on the back. Hard.

Quit it already! All you're doing is hurting me! Violent heroines aren't in these days, you know.

"All righty! You'd better have a blast on your date! I'm cheering for you guys, got it?" Just as she said that, we arrived in front of Miori's place. "Here you go. Good night!" She innocently handed me a plastic bag with the remnants of her Super Cup in it and disappeared into her home with a buoyant little skip in her step.

What the— Throw your own trash away!

Days flew by, and soon came Saturday—the day Uta and I had promised to go to the festival together. I'd never gone on a date with a girl before. The nervous jitters were so powerful that I woke up too early even though it was the weekend. Uta had basketball practice, so we were meeting up in the evening.

I lay on my bed and stared at the RINE messages I'd exchanged with her. We'd decided to meet up in front of a convenience store near a section of town where the festival would be held. Our rendezvous time was tentatively set for 5 p.m., but more accurately, Uta had said she'd contact me after her practice ended.

Ah, man. I'm way too restless! When I get like this, working at the café is the best way to calm me down, but I don't have a shift today. We've got finals coming up, so I guess I'll study instead... Wait, what am I supposed to wear? Uta's probably going to show up in a yukata. Should I get in the festival spirit and wear something traditional like a jinbei? Will that make me look too gung ho? I feel like most people wear western clothing to Tanabata festivals these days.

Hold on, snap out of it, and think calmly! I don't even own a jinbei in the first place. A Japanese festival it may be, but western clothing it is. Still, clothes... Miori picked out some for me, but that basically means those are the only outfits I have, and Uta's already seen all of them! I don't want to wear my pre-debut stuff and make her think I'm unfashionable, but if I don't want her to think I'm the type of guy who wears the same clothes every day...

Okay, I'll go to downtown Takasaki and do some clothes shopping there. I've

got time to kill until the evening, anyway. I didn't have any fashion sense, but I'd been studying up by watching fashion YouTubers lately. I already had a few outfit candidates in mind. The only reason I hadn't bought them yet was because I didn't have enough money, but I'd recently received last month's paycheck, so that problem was solved.

And so, after I studied for my finals in the morning, I got on a train to Takasaki. It was no exaggeration to say that Takasaki was Gunma's only city. It had way more buildings and facilities than anywhere else in the prefecture, and there was a constant stream of people coming and going from the city. It was pretty close to my town too, so it was convenient for me.

I walked into a large department store and looked around the clothing section. *Hmm... I'm not sure anymore,* I thought as I browsed the merchandise.

A saleswoman started talking to me. "Can I help you find something?"

Urgh! I'm a shy introvert, so I don't like talking to store employees. Though I thought that, I figured a professional's fashion sense would be more dependable than my own. I gave her a rough description of what kind of clothes I wanted.

"Okay! Please wait one moment!" The lady began to select clothes with an enthusiastic smile. Her reaction was so positive that it started making me feel uneasy instead. When she finished picking out several outfits, she urged me into the changing room. "Sir, you're very tall, so I believe these will suit you well!"

The saleswoman handed me the clothes, and I felt as if she was treating me like a dress-up doll. *Hmm... This seems pretty good. I look cool...but it's sorta pricey. Huh?! This is ten thousand yen?! That's way too much for a high schooler! I shouldn't buy this. I know I shouldn't, I really do...but...*

"Thank you for your patronage! Please come again!"

Ultimately, due to the saleswoman's encouragement, I left the store with multiple articles of clothing in tow. My hard-earned wages had disappeared in a mere thirty minutes, but strangely enough, I didn't feel any regret. After that, I looked around a few other stores and ended up purchasing another piece of

clothing after losing to a salesperson's persistence.

It was now noon and I was hungry, so I went up to the sixth floor—the restaurant floor—of the department store to eat lunch. I picked a Japanese place and satiated myself with a tonkatsu set meal, then checked the clock. It was still only 1 p.m. I had plenty of time until Uta and I were scheduled to meet, so I went to the bookstore. I bought the mystery novel that Hoshimiya had recommended and then left the department store. There was a chic café nearby, so I dropped in for a break.

Ah, coffee is delicious! Ever since the time leap, I've been making do with canned coffee since funds were tight, but nothing beats a proper brew from a store. While I was relishing the taste of fresh coffee, my phone chimed.

I checked the screen. It was a RINE message from Hoshimiya. And it wasn't to the group chat—it was a private message to me. *I wonder what's up?*

I opened up her text. The message said, "I'm shopping in Yokohama!" Also attached was a picture of Hoshimiya standing in front of what must've been a shopping mall in Yokohama. She wore casual clothes and a hat, with her hair tied behind her head. She smiled brightly and held up her fingers in a peace sign.

Hoshimiya is super cute today too! And it feels kinda flirtatious, though she probably doesn't realize it since she's an airhead. I sent her a "Nice!" sticker in response. *Won't I seem cold if that's all I send?* I worried and then threw in an "I'm jealous lol" after.

I grinned and stared at the picture until she replied to my messages.

Hoshimiya Hikari: What do you want as your souvenir?

Natsuki: I'll be happy with anything!

Hoshimiya Hikari: Whaaat? That makes it hard for me! lol

Natsuki: Then, how about sweets?

Hoshimiya Hikari: Sure, Natsuki-kun, what kind of sweets do you like?

Natsuki: I guess cookies or chocolate?

Hoshimiya Hikari: Okie dokie!

Natsuki: Thanks! Can't wait!

She followed up our conversation with an anime sticker that said, "Leave it to me!" on it. *Oh, Hoshimiya watches anime too.* In the past I would've found it unexpected, but now that I'd gotten to know her, it seemed in line with her personality. I'd learned that she had the makings of an otaku. I thought our exchange would end there, but...

Hoshimiya Hikari: Natsuki-kun, are you going to the Tanabata festival?

A moment after I'd received her last sticker, she sent me another message. It was a natural question to ask; she'd told me what she was doing, so now she was asking me what I was up to, simple as that. It was common sense that this was where our conversation would head, but my hands froze. *I don't really want to tell Hoshimiya that I'm going to the festival with Uta... But then I'd be dishonest. I chose to go, so I shouldn't hide it. And everyone will know on Monday, anyway.*

Natsuki: I'm going with Uta!

I replied honestly. She read my message immediately, but there was a disconcerting pause before her next response. My throat felt oddly dry, so I took a sip of my coffee. It had cooled already, so it tasted more bitter than usual.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Have fun!

Despite my nerves, all she sent back were those simple words.

Welp, it doesn't mean much when someone takes time to reply after they read your message. Stop getting weird expectations... There's no way Hoshimiya would feel anything if Uta and I went somewhere alone. After all, she doesn't think of me as anything more than just a friend.

I finished off my cold coffee and took out the book I'd just bought. I was feeling strangely down, so I began reading it to lift my mood. I could hear people chattering around me, but I found the background noise pleasant. I traced the words with my eyes and immediately immersed myself in the world of the book.

After some time, I was brought back to reality by the footsteps of a new customer entering the café. When I came to, it was almost time to meet up with Uta. I paid my bill and left the store.

That was a good time! Hoshimiya's recommendations never miss, and it's nice to amble about on my own sometimes. I think I've calmed down too, and wearing my new clothes feels nice. I can show up to my date with mental clarity now. As I psyched myself up, I received a message from Uta that said, "I can make it on time!"

I'm good to go. All right, let's have a blast with Uta at the festival!

My so-called mental clarity was brittle and crumbled as soon as I saw her.

She wore a red yukata. Blooming against the striking red cloth were flowers of all different colors. Her short hair had been loosely braided, and a large flower accessory was pinned to one side. Uta usually kept her appearance simple, but today she was dressed to impress, with her cuteness on full display.

She glanced restlessly around. When her gaze found me, she waved in a reserved manner. My sanity returned to me, and I rushed over to her, feeling flustered.

Uta fiddled with her hair and averted her eyes. "Uh, um... Err, m-morning?" Her voice dwindled with each word.

I couldn't believe I was hearing those timid noises coming out of her mouth. "U-Uh, yeah. G'morning," I stiffly fumbled out. The voice that escaped my throat was raspy. *What the hell?* Surely there must've been a calm brain cell somewhere inside of my head, but for the most part, my mind was in a state of mass panic.

Mental clarity? That guy's long dead! Also, what the heck are we saying?

Morning? It's evening! Look, the sky's turning crimson already!

However, neither of us commented on our silly greeting, and no one was around to make fun of us. I couldn't formulate any words; nothing would come out of my mouth. She and I were facing each other, but our eyes refused to meet. Eventually, I glanced at Uta, and her downcast eyes looked up at me at the same time. We locked eyes for a moment. She quickly averted her gaze again, causing me to look away as well.

"I..." she whispered in a subdued tone. "I wore a yukata! Wh-What do you think?" There'd been a spike in intensity midway through her question—she clearly couldn't control the volume of her voice.

I peered at her, and she clasped her hands behind her back, showing herself to me.

"It looks good on you," I managed to wring out.

For some reason, she hung her head. "Th-Thank you very much."

Why is she being so polite? There are a lot of things I could tease her for today. I mean, she's practically a different person! Whatever was going through Uta's head was a mystery to me, but it was clear that she was way more nervous than I was.

"Are those two high schoolers? They're adorbs!"

"Wow, they're both bright red. You can do it!"

A few girls who looked to be in college made comments that obviously referred to us as they walked past. Embarrassed, our blushes deepened.

"A-Anyway! Let's get going!" Uta took a step forward with her right hand and left foot stretched out together in an exaggerated manner.

Right. We're not even inside the festival area yet. And it's directly in front of the convenience store. Again, what the hell are we doing? I took my place next to Uta, and we headed down the sidewalk along the main road. She looked like she was having trouble walking because of the yukata. On the bright side, it looked like she'd chosen a pair of comfortable sandals rather than hard geta shoes.

“Am I going too fast?” I asked after a moment.

“Oh, no. I’m fine!” she assured me.

As we continued onwards, the amount of people walking around gradually increased. Many festivalgoers were in high spirits, and of those, many looked to be young students. The closer we got to the festival grounds, the more the mood transformed into that trademark merry atmosphere.

Before long, a road lined with stalls on both sides came into view. Large crowds of people bustled along the road, and the darkening sky was lit up with lanterns. Uta had been walking next to me with a stiff expression, but her face brightened when she saw the festivities.

“Oooh!” she exclaimed. “Don’t you think festivals are great? Everyone looks like they’re having fun, so it gets me going too!”

“Yeah, I get what you mean. The ambience is nice too,” I agreed.

We slowly regained our ability to converse normally. My heart was still pounding harder than usual, but at least I looked calm on the outside now.

When we stepped into the festival area, Uta suddenly said, “I want cotton candy.” I somehow managed to look at her face. Her lips protruded slightly in a shy pout. “Why are you looking at me? Are you gonna call me a kid?”

“No, no, I wasn’t going to say anything like that!” I said.

“Then don’t look at me... I-It makes me nervous.”

“O-Okay...”

“Sorry, I lied. I want you to look at me.”

“Which one is it?”

“I put all this effort into wearing a yukata, so I want you to look at me. Just don’t let me catch you gaping!”

“Uh, that’s pretty unreasonable, don’tcha think?” I quipped.

She giggled. “I’m gonna go buy cotton candy. Wait here, ’kay?” she said and lined up in front of the cotton candy stall.

I waited in front of the vending machine until Uta returned with cotton candy

in hand. She stood next to me and began licking it. *She looks like a small animal. How cute!*

“It’s so sweet!” she exclaimed.

“Of course it is. You know it’s just a lump of sugar, right?” I replied.

She glared at me with narrowed eyes. “That’s an unimaginative way to put it. What a killjoy!”

Did I lose points for that just now?

Uta quickly finished her cotton candy and then asked, “Natsu, what do you want to eat?”

“I’m not sure, though I am hungry.” *Let’s see. There’s yakisoba, takoyaki, okonomiyaki, buttered potatoes... Huh? Okonomiyaki? Aren’t Uta’s parents running an okonomiyaki stand?* “Okay, then, how about okonomiyaki?”

Uta realized what I was thinking immediately and frantically rejected my idea. “Y-You can’t come to our stall!”

“What? Why? Didn’t you say it’s tasty?”

She hesitated for a moment. “It’s fine if it’s just you, but if we both go... They’ll see us!”

That’s... That’s very true. If we showed up together, Uta’s parents would bear witness to their daughter all dolled up in a yukata, walking around a festival with me—a boy. When I imagined that coming to pass, the conclusion was obvious. “You’re right. Let’s not.”

“Yeah. Why don’t we have some yakisoba together instead?”

I went along with her suggestion, and we bought yakisoba from a nearby stall. After we picked up our food, we continued down the street for a bit until we reached a place with open space on each side of the road. The people in charge of the festival had designated this as the rest area, and many people were already taking a break. We found an empty spot and sat down.

Uta took a bite of the yakisoba and burst into a smile. “Mmm! Deeelish!”

“Eating yakisoba during a festival makes it taste even better,” I said.

“Yes! I suuuper get you! Maybe it’s the whatchamacallit effect?”

“Are you thinking of the placebo effect?”

“Yes, that! I’m surprised you guessed it.”

Tell me about it. “Whatchamacallit effect” is not a lot of info. And I don’t think this is the correct use case for “placebo effect” either.

“Okay, I finished my half. Here you go, Natsu.”

While I was wondering whether I should explain what the placebo effect was actually about, Uta had already finished scarfing down her noodles. She handed me the container and wooden chopsticks. Predictably, the chopsticks had already been used by her.

Isn’t this...an indirect kiss? Nah, stop it. No one cares about stuff like that these days. Right? It’ll be more embarrassing if I make a fuss over it. Okay, I’ll just eat it like all’s right with the world.

“This yakisoba is really tasty,” I commented. Uta didn’t say anything in return, so I glanced over at her to see if something was wrong. Her face was bright red for some reason. “Uta?”

“I-I’m gonna go buy us drinks! Keep eating!” she said and then ran off in a hurry.

Was she that thirsty? Huh, well, I guess this yakisoba is pretty salty.

The sun finished sinking beyond the horizon, and nighttime soon came, bringing with it even more people. I had to avoid bumping into them as I walked, and I was concerned about Uta. She was so small that I worried I’d lose her in the crowd. Another large wave of people approached us from the front, and I dodged it. But I felt a tug on my sleeve—Uta was quietly clinging onto it.

“I-I feel like you’re going to get lost, Natsu,” she babbled out an excuse.

Hah. I’m going to get lost, not you? If you’re gonna do that, then we might as well just hold hands. That’ll be more secure... I have a feeling that’s what Uta actually wants to do too. However, I didn’t suggest that myself. I had an inkling that there would be no turning back if I did.

Holding hands isn't something friends do. A guy and a girl do that when they're dating. If I propose we hold hands, it could be construed that I like her in that way. If Uta confessed to me then, I wouldn't be able to reject her. How am I supposed to tell her that I'm okay holding hands, but I don't want to date her?

Well... Of course I'm fond of her. That's why I'm here, after all! As I thought that, Hoshimiya's smile flashed through my mind. At the end of the day, I hadn't decided what I wanted to do. That's why I couldn't take the initiative in anything. Miori told me to go if I wanted to...but wasn't it a mistake for me to come here after all?

My inner turmoil was interrupted by Uta. "It's fine. I get it," she told me in a gentle tone as she looked up at me.

What on earth do you "get"? How much do you know? I wanted to ask, but I hesitated. I didn't dare ask her to spell it out for me.

"More importantly, look! There's a shooting gallery! I wanna play that!" She dashed off without another word. Now, she was so full of energy that her reserved tone from just a moment ago felt like a passing illusion.

She's being considerate and focusing on letting me have fun. Well then, I'd better respond to her considerations in full! "Leave this game to me!" I grinned and flexed my arm. *I may not look like it, but I played a lot of FPS in college to kill time. I'm pretty good! What do first-person shooter games have to do with a shooting gallery? Nothing. Nothing at all... Unless, uh, I can control the gun with a mouse?*

"You're that confident?" Uta asked.

"No, actually, not really..." I admitted.

"Whaaat?" She laughed, her sides shaking hard. "Okay, then, let's see who's better!"

She and I entered the shooting gallery and competed to see who was the better shot.

"Oh! I hit it!" Uta shouted near the end of our contest.

The results of our match determined that Uta was the superior marksman,

though only by a small margin of error. I had missed every single shot while she had managed to hit one.

“Yeah, but that’s way off from the one you were actually aiming for,” I remarked.

“L-Luck is part of skill!” She vigorously cleared her throat to gloss over the subject. The owner of the shooting gallery handed Uta the prize she’d knocked over. Contained within the small box was a practical-looking key chain. “Here, it’s yours, Natsu!”

“Nah, I couldn’t. You won it fair and square.”

“Take it! Besides, if I had to label it, I’d say this was designed for guys, right?”

Okay, yeah, it does look boyish. Well, I don’t own a key chain anyway, so I guess I’ll just accept it with gratitude. “All right, then. I’ll treat you to something in return.”

“Ehhh? It’s fine! You don’t have to.”

“I make hard-earned dough while you’re at practice, you know? Don’t worry about the money.” I shot her a smug grin, though in reality, I’d spent pretty much all of my money on clothes today. I was kinda concerned.

“Okay, then! I’ll take you up on that!” She nodded cheerfully.

However, in her bliss, Uta had failed to notice someone weaving through the waves of people at full tilt—directly at her. I spotted them first and instinctively grabbed Uta’s shoulder and pulled her close.

“Huh?” she said in surprise, but she didn’t resist and tottered right into my chest.

The person who’d been charging their way through the crowds in hurry cut right through where Uta had just been standing.

Uta finally realized that I’d done it to protect her and looked up at me. “S-Sorry... And thanks.” Her face was right below mine, and combined with the angle, her destructive force was tremendous.

After a pause, she spoke up again. “When we’re this close, I’m reminded how tall you are.”

“Same here... You’re really tiny,” I replied. “You’re a snug fit in my arms.”

“I’m still growing.” We both sounded so hesitant and awkward.

We moved away from the crowd and stood at the side of the road, eyes locked. For some reason, Uta didn’t try to break free from my hold...and I didn’t let her go either.

“Huh? Isn’t that Haibara-kun?” A familiar voice called out to me.

We flinched and quickly separated from each other. I turned in the direction of the voice and saw my classmate Fujiwara standing still in the crowd. “H-Hey,” I said.

“I see you came to have fun too, Haibara-kun.” She walked over.

Accompanying Fujiwara was another one of my classmates, Hino. “Wassup. How’s it hanging?” he said, flippant as ever. They were both in my cleaning group.

Fujiwara noticed Uta standing next to me and stared at her blankly. “Oh? Uta, you’re here too.”

“H-Heyooo...” Uta blushed and timidly raised her hand in greeting.

“Whoa! Sakura-chan, you look super cute. That yukata looks good on you! And the hair accessory is a nice touch too!” Hino looked overly excited and laid on the praise.

Her expression unreadable, Fujiwara pinched his cheek, causing him to yelp in pain. She then looked at Uta and I in turn, as if surprised that we were together. “Are you two... You know?”

“No! Don’t misunderstand. We’re just hanging out as friends!” Uta replied bluntly. “Right, Natsu?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Fujiwara let out a disinterested little “hmm” and tilted her head to the side. “So you’re not an item yet?”

“S-Stop blabbing!” It was unlike her, but Uta looked genuinely upset and drew up close to Fujiwara. The two of them began talking in hushed voices off to one

side, so I couldn't hear what they were discussing.

Hino came up beside me and started chatting me up. "Yo! Having fun?"

"Yeah, man," I replied. "What about you? Are you guys...like that?"

"Mm-hmm. We started dating two weeks ago."

Fujiwara and Hino, huh? That's kinda unexpected... Or maybe not? "Wow. Well, I did think you guys seemed close during cleaning time."

Fujiwara is coolheaded and something like a mediator for all the girls in our class, while Hino comes off as shallow, but he can be surprisingly serious. Maybe they're actually a good match for each other!

"I don't care if we keep it a secret or not, but she doesn't want to tell anyone. She said it'd be embarrassing if other people knew we were dating," Hino explained. "Isn't she the cutest?"

"Uh, yeah... Very cute." *How can she say that when she's the one who chose Hino? No, don't jump the gun. Maybe she didn't?* "Who confessed?"

"You'd think I was the one, right? Well, she confessed to me."

"Whoa, seriously? That's shocking." My image of Fujiwara changed. *I see, so she's into guys like Hino.*

As if she'd sensed we were talking about her, Fujiwara stopped talking to Uta and walked back over. "Just so you know, anything that comes out of this guy's mouth is a lie."

"Sure, whatever you say," I replied with a half-hearted shrug.

She glared at Hino, and he shrugged the same way I had.

"In the first place, I don't really care if I'm dating this guy..."

"Kanata, just drop it. We should get going." Hino grasped Fujiwara's hand.

"Hey! They're standing right next to us!" She was flustered but didn't look as annoyed as her words sounded.

Yeah, she's cute. Usually Fujiwara's the one lording over Hino, but when it's just the two of them, she gets pretty shy. Wow, I see... So that's how it is. Y'know, that is pretty cute. I can get behind this ship!

“We’ve gotta run now, so we’ll see you two some other time,” Hino said. He turned to Uta and winked at her. “Sakura-chan, good luck!”

“Uh, thanks...” Uta nodded back.

We watched them leave, and right as I thought they’d disappear into the crowd, Hino stopped moving and turned over his shoulder. He looked like he couldn’t help himself as he smiled at us mischievously and added, “Oh, yeah. Here’s some advice: if you don’t want people to think you’re dating, then you’d better stop embracing each other in public.” Without giving us a chance to respond, he vanished into the crowd with Fujiwara.

We barely heard Fujiwara ask in a surprised voice, “Huh? They were hugging?”

I really wish he wouldn’t drop a bomb at the very last second... Though, it is our fault for doing something that would give other people the wrong idea. I turned to check up on Uta. She was looking towards the ground, her face as red as an apple.

“Did we really look like...that?” she asked.

“Sounds like we did,” I replied.

“S-Sorry...”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry too...”

Once again, an awkward silence fell between us. It was my first date with a girl, but I’d already faced numerous challenges. *If Miori saw us, I bet she’d shower us with nonstop complaints.*

“Hey, wanna hang up our wishes?” Uta asked.

She pointed at some nearby bamboo. It was adorned with tons of colorful strips of tanzaku paper, perfect for writing wishes on during Tanabata. Festivalgoers were welcome to freely decorate the bamboo with tanzaku of their own. The neighborhood association was running a booth that handed out the strips, and they even had a table with writing tools at the ready.

“Good idea. It is a Tanabata festival after all,” I replied.

We each picked up a tanzaku and pen and started writing at the table. *Hmm... What should I wish for? God already granted my wish.* I glanced over at Uta who was staring at her own piece of paper with pen in hand. She, too, looked lost.

“What’re you gonna write, Uta?”

“Hmm... Natsu, can you look that way?” She grabbed me by both arms and faced me in the other direction.

I guess she doesn’t want me to see? The thought ran through my mind while she quickly filled out her tanzaku.

“Okay, you can turn back now!”

“You’re not gonna show me?” I questioned.

“If you really want to look you can, but I don’t think you should,” she said shyly.

I’m curious, but if I persist and read something about me, then I won’t know how to react. Lemme just quietly write down my own wish. I quickly jotted down, “best youth ever.” *Yeah, it’s gotta be this for me!*

Uta blinked at me. “Wow. ‘Best youth ever,’ huh?”

“Mm-hmm! We’re only high schoolers for so long. Don’t you want to enjoy it to the fullest?”

“Yeah, good point. I think so too... But...” She flailed her hands a bit, unsure of what to say, and then peeped up at me. “Hasn’t that already come true?” The soft timbre of her voice combined with her yukata really drove home in my mind that today was Tanabata.

“This is one more facet for having the best youth ever,” I quietly murmured.

Uta laughed. “That sounds like something an old man would say!”

That’s the most insulting thing you could say to a guy who’s on his second round of life. Please, no more!

“Ahem, ahem!” I cleared my throat in an exaggerated manner. “A-Anyway, let’s hang up our tanzaku.”

“Come to think of it, why do we hang up pieces of paper on bamboo?” she

wondered.

“Isn’t it because the stories say that they’ll reach the heavens that way?” I wasn’t well versed in Japanese culture or folklore, so I was just guessing based on vague recollections. If memory served me right, paper used to be a luxury item in the past, so the act of writing a wish on it had ritualistic value. People believed that their wishes would then reach the heavens if they decorated bamboo with those little strips. Or something like that.

“I see.” Uta gazed up at the sky.

I copied her and looked up as well—it was a beautiful night sky without a cloud in sight. Though they were slightly obscured by the lamps and buildings’ sky glow, I could still make out some shining stars. Unfortunately, it wasn’t dark enough for the Milky Way to be visible. Or maybe I was just looking up at a bad angle.

“You know what? I’m going to change my wish,” Uta said after a moment.

“Huh? That’s random. Why?”

“I feel like it’d be wrong of me to wish for this... So I think I’ll wish for the same thing you did. I want to have the best youth ever too!”

She threw away her first tanzaku and wrote the same thing that I had on a new slip. The two of us picked a spot on the bamboo and decorated it with our colorful pieces of paper.

“Awesome sauce!” Uta looked satisfied, with her hands placed on her hips.

As I peered at her back, a memory from mere moments ago flashed through my mind. I’d accidentally caught a glimpse of her original wish when she’d dropped her tanzaku into the trash. *“I hope Natsu falls in love with me.”* Sakura Uta had not made a wish to the gods for that.

“How was practice?”

“It was exhausting, but I had fun! Miorin and Wakamura-senpai looked like they were enjoying themselves, and it feels like the team’s gotten stronger as a whole. I’m gonna get waaay better too!”

“I can’t wait to see you on the court!”

“Oh, I know! If you’ve got time over summer break, then come help me do some private training.”

“Sure, but I’ve got nothing to teach you. I learned on my own, so I’m decent at one-on-ones, but that doesn’t necessarily transfer over to team play.”

“You just need to show up. It’ll motivate me!”

“Well, if you’re fine with that, then all right. I’ve got nothing planned for summer break, anyway.”

“Yippee!”

“But man. It’s summer break already? Time really does fly!”

“I know, right? But I can’t wait! I’ll probably be engrossed in club activities most days, though.”

“Maybe I should throw myself into my work, then. But I do want to seize this opportunity to go somewhere with everyone.”

“Oh, that sounds good! I super duper can’t wait! It’s the summer, so we gotta go to either the mountains or the sea!”

“I know, right? Well, I’m sure everyone will be busy with club activities or have other plans, but I hope we can all fit a trip into our schedules.”

“True. But I’m still looking forward to it. Oooh! I also want to have a barbecue with everyone!”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but we have finals before summer vacation. Did you forget?”

“D-Don’t remind me! Argh, and here I was in such a good mood!”

Uta and I chatted as we walked home together. We’d had our fill of the festival ambience, so we were being good kids and returning home before it got too late. Uta had met up with me after practice, so she did look a little tired. Plus, she wasn’t used to walking around in a yukata, so it wouldn’t be good to have her stroll around too much.

She lived close to the festival area, so I was walking Uta home. As we got

further and further away from the festivities, the number of people ambling about gradually decreased. The loud hustle and bustle that had surrounded us just moments ago soon vanished, and only the sound of crickets chirping remained.

Suddenly, something touched my left hand. And then that something wrapped itself around my hand. I didn't need to look down to know—it was Uta's right hand.

I was walking down the night street while holding hands with Uta.

After a beat she said, "I can do this much, right? No one is around anymore."

I didn't tell her it was fine, but she took my silence as a yes.

I could feel the warmth of her skin against my left hand. Her heat was making me worry that I might sweat, and my heart began to race, raising my body temperature even more. No words passed between us. I was way beyond nervous, to the point where I purely felt comfortable again. *I want to stay like this forever.* Just as I thought that, our time came to an end.

"My house is over there." Uta pointed at an okonomiyaki store that practically oozed local vibes.

We walked around to the back of the store, and it turned into a quaint-looking single-family home. *So this is where Uta lives, huh? It's a marvel that I know where one of my friends lives now!*

She gently let go of my hand, took a step forward, and then turned back to face me. "Natsu, I had a ton of fun today! Thanks for coming with me!" she said in her usual energetic voice and shot me her brightest smile.

"Same here, I had a good time. Thanks for inviting me," I replied.

Uta nodded.

A lukewarm breeze blew between the two of us. We'd walked around to a backstreet, so there wasn't a single soul around. We stood there in silence. Uta seemed like she wanted to say something; I could tell that much simply from looking at her.

Seeing her get extremely nervous made me feel an irresistible urge to help

her, but I had no words to offer at that moment. I still had lingering thoughts about Hoshimiya—I had no right to say anything.

While I contemplated, Uta continued to stare at me. We stayed like that, eyes locked, for what felt like seconds or perhaps even minutes. I didn't find the situation strange or embarrassing. Uta looked beautiful wearing her yukata no matter how many times I saw her in it.

Eventually, she gazed downwards and lightly waved at me. "Well, um, see you later."

"Yeah, see you at school," I replied and turned around.

I felt like hanging my head, but I looked up instead. *It doesn't make sense for me to look down. I had fun today!* In contrast to my muddled feelings, the night sky was perfectly clear. The twinkling stars were especially visible from the unlit street.

"Natsu," Uta whispered directly into my ear. She tugged on my sleeve and forced me to look at her.

The moment her face came into view at point-blank range, I felt something warm against my cheek. I stopped breathing. It felt like time had come to a standstill.

"This is how I feel," Uta said. She moved away from my face and looked into my dumbfounded eyes. "But I won't put it into words yet, so don't give me your reply."

Her logic was sound. If she didn't say anything, then there'd be nothing for me to reply to.

"I won't give up. Right now, no matter who it is you hold in your heart...I won't lose to them." She was staring me straight in the eye. "Natsu, I'll definitely make you turn my way." She conveyed her fierce words with an earnest expression—she was more dazzling than all the stars twinkling in the night sky. "So just wait and see, okay?"

She tilted her head at me, and all I could do was nod in return.



Seeing my flabbergasted expression, Uta smiled brightly like a sunflower. “All righty! I’m going in for real now! See you on Monday at school!” She waved, turned around, and opened her door.

I stood stock-still until I saw her disappear into her home. When I touched my cheek, I could still feel the lingering sensation of Uta’s lips. I had spent some time earlier wondering why she’d changed her wish. For a moment, I thought she’d given up on the notion of dating me, but I had been wrong. The answer was much simpler: it was a declaration that she wouldn’t let her wish be passively granted by anyone, but that she would make me pay attention to her by the strength of her own charm.

“That’s gotta be a foul...” I murmured.

At any rate, the only thing I was sure of was that I had been completely and utterly defeated.

That I had seen the whole thing was a downright coincidence.

After our main basketball practice ended, Uta flew out of the gym as soon as individual training was over. Everyone cocked their heads in puzzlement, wondering what was so urgent, but I’d heard the details from Natsuki already, so I found her rush endearing. She had plenty of time until their date, but it took us girls a long time to get ready.

At my own pace, I met up with my closest classmate and good friend, Serika, and we headed to the festival together. We ran into our other friends as we aimlessly walked around, which made it all the more fun.

Serika was a pretty low-energy person, but she’d converse with me when I wanted to talk and stay quiet when I didn’t. She was good at picking up on my mood, and I liked that about her. *Well, when the topic turns to music, Serika will keep chatting forever.* As usual, she carried her guitar case on her back. She was part of the light music club, and I’d heard she was a good guitarist.

“Whew. I’m full,” I said.

“Wanna go home? I’m satisfied enough,” Serika replied.

We were stuffed with buttered potatoes and yakisoba, so we left the festival. It was fun to walk around, but our legs were getting tired. I was curious how Uta and Natsuki’s date was going, but it was too hard to spot them in the crowds. Of course, going out of my way to search for them just to check up on them would’ve been too overprotective of me. Natsuki occasionally needed to give it his best shot alone so he could mature.

I explained everything to Serika while we walked, until she suddenly said, “Y’know, you’ve been talking about your childhood friend a lot lately.”

“Huh? You think so?” I tilted my head as I mulled it over. *I don’t mean to talk about Natsuki that much. Well, the only one who knows about my deal with him is Serika, so maybe it’s inevitable that I’ll always wind up talking to her about him.* I trusted Serika to keep secrets. After all, music was the only thing that interested her.

“To be fair, a lot of things have happened recently!” I responded.

“Hmm,” came her disinterested reply.

The main street was still full of people, so we took a backstreet to the station. As we walked down the empty street, we happened to catch sight of a boy and a girl facing each other. The girl was wearing a yukata. *A couple at the end of their date?* I wondered as I approached the heartwarming scene. But then I realized, *Huh? That’s Natsuki and Uta! Why are they standing in the backstreets staring at each other like that?*

The air between the two felt serious. I didn’t want to interrupt, so I stopped walking. Eventually, Uta waved goodbye to Natsuki, and he turned around. *Oh, I caught them right when they’re splitting up. That’s right. I heard Uta lives around here,* I thought as I watched them.

“Huh?”

The sound slipped out of me when I witnessed Uta stop Natsuki from going home...and kiss him on the cheek. After exchanging a few words, she parted ways with him and entered her house. Natsuki stood frozen for a while until his consciousness returned, and then he walked away.

I'd watched the whole thing play out.

"Wow, Sakura-san really worked up her courage," Serika commented in an even tone from beside me. I didn't respond, so she glanced over at me, puzzled. "Miori? You all right?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Let's go home." I hastily glossed over my awkward pause and continued walking as if nothing was wrong. When I acted with my A game, not even Serika would notice anything.

There's no way... I can't say it. Not even to Serika.

The moment I'd seen the kiss, I was frightened by how my heart clouded over.



Final Chapter: Business as Usual

Not gonna lie, but I felt quite nervous. It was Monday morning, and I had my hand on the classroom door. I took a deep breath. *O-Okay, let's do this. I didn't forget my mental clarity today. That fella is right here!*

As soon as I entered the classroom, Nanase noticed my presence and raised her hand slightly. "Good morning, Haibara-kun."

"Hey, morning," I replied as I glanced around.

"Oh, Natsuki-kun, morning!" Hoshimiya said as she energetically waved her hand.

"Hiya, morning."

Uta was standing right next to Hoshimiya. Our eyes met, and Uta's face instantly flushed as red as an apple. *When you react to me so blatantly like that, the embarrassment is contagious, so my face starts getting hot too. Please, stop!*

"Good...morning, Natsu," she said.

"M-Morning."

After we fumbled out our greetings, I averted my eyes and made my way to my seat. Hoshimiya and Nanase clearly looked suspicious, but I left the explanation to Uta. The mental clarity that I'd been so confident in had fled somewhere. *He's such a fast runner!*

I sat down, and right when I'd managed to calm my heart, Reita and Tatsuya came up to me.

Reita looked especially amused, a wide smirk pasted on his face. "You're here, Natsuki. Now then...what happened at the festival? You'll tell us, won't you?" he asked.

"How'd you know? I thought you didn't go to the festival," I replied after some hesitation.

“I’ve got a lot of friends. I heard you and Uta were there alone.”

Fair. We did see people from our school besides Fujiwara and Hino. Reita is well-connected, so of course he’d hear about it.

“So, I heard Uta wore a yukata. Did you take a picture? How far did you get with her?” Strangely enough, Reita was the one asking me questions in rapid-fire succession.

This guy only gets excited when talking about other people’s romance! “She did wear a yukata, but we didn’t take a picture. And there’s nowhere to ‘get with her’!” As I said that, I deeply regretted that I hadn’t taken a picture of Uta in her yukata.

“I see,” he replied.

Tatsuya was listening to us with an extremely serious expression.

“Tatsuya, you’re going to get hurt no matter what you hear, so just go over there.” Reita shooed him away like a dog.

This guy is truly cruel! What happened to being my ideal man? It looks like that was just a figment of my imagination.

“Huh?! Don’t fuck with me; I’m not gonna get hurt!” Tatsuya, being Tatsuya, had been egged on by Reita’s attitude and instead postured himself to show that he would be sticking around for the whole story.

This is so awkward! I wish you guys would cut it out. What kind of expression am I supposed to make while talking about this?! I peeked over at Uta—she was being bombarded with questions by Nanase, just like I was. I couldn’t hear exactly what they were talking about, but Uta’s face was bright red, so I had a good idea.

Hoshimiya was regarding me with an inscrutable expression. Our eyes met, and she turned away to actively join in Nanase and Uta’s conversation. I thought something might’ve been wrong, but it looked like we’d just made eye contact by coincidence, judging from how smooth her movement was. I was startled because I’d never seen her make that expression before.

“Natsuki? You shouldn’t ignore people, you know?” Reita threw his arm

around my shoulder. He was having the time of his life.

“Nothing in particular happened. We just walked around the festival like everyone else,” I clarified.

I heard Tatsuya crack his knuckles. “Really? Can I punch you?” he asked.

“Hey! You’re the one who told me it’d be okay if I went with her!” I protested.

“Sure, but I didn’t say I wouldn’t clobber you. If you don’t want to get beat up, then spit out the whole story!”

I didn’t have much of a choice, so I recounted my date with Uta from start to finish.

Tatsuya grew paler and paler until finally he said, “I’m gonna go to the roof,” and left.

If you can’t handle the truth, then why’d you make me say everything?! Besides, I didn’t even mention that we held hands... And obviously I omitted the cheek kiss! How the hell am I supposed to admit that happened?!

“Now that Tatsuya is gone, we can get to the nitty-gritty stuff, right?” Reita pressed.

“Please, have mercy...” I moaned.

Unfortunately, though I’d defeated Tatsuya, Reita wasn’t going to budge. I could also hear Fujiwara and Hino talking about Uta and me in the classroom. It felt like the spotlight was shining right on me. *So this is the cost of going on a so-called “love-dovey” festival date. Quite the heavy price to pay...*

“I told you already, Natsu and I aren’t dating!” Uta’s voice rang throughout the classroom.

She wasn’t yelling, more so trying to inform everyone. She likely wanted to avoid rumors being spread about us. If I were in her shoes, I’d be grateful people were setting up the atmosphere for us, but she was honest to the core.

Nanase glanced at Uta and then at me. “So? Why don’t you guys just go out? Right, Hikari?”

Hoshimiya looked hesitant when the conversation was directed at her, yet

she clenched her hands into fists before her chest. “Huh? Oh, yeah, right... Of course I’ll be rooting for you guys.”

I forced a smile at that. *I see... So she’s rooting for us... Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.*

Seeing my strained appearance, Reita leaned towards me and whispered into my ear. “Honestly, I didn’t think you’d take Uta up on her invitation.”

“That’s unexpected. So there are things even *you* can’t predict,” I told him.

“Natsuki, what on earth do you think of me? No one can predict everything!”

His was a reasonable rebuttal, but I felt like if anyone could do it, it’d be Reita.

“You like Hoshimiya-san, and you have a sincere personality. I thought you wouldn’t go on a date with someone you weren’t in love with and give them false hope... Oh, I get it.” He grinned and then asked a question he already knew the answer to. “I’m guessing you’ve come to like Uta as much as you like Hoshimiya-san?”

“If you know it already, then please don’t say it out loud...” I held my forehead. I’d already vaguely realized what he had deduced, but I’d been trying to deny it. Now that he’d put it into words, I was forced to become self-aware. *Reita really is a wicked guy!*

“Well, no matter who you pick, I’ll cheer you on.”

“Really? I feel like I can’t trust your words, Reita.”

“Don’t you think you’ve been a little *too* harsh with me lately?”

Hey, it’s not my fault that it’s hard to figure out what you’re thinking!

“I’m serious. Between Uta and Hoshimiya-san, I’ll cheer you on no matter who you choose. Though, it looks like you’ll need a lot more time to break through Hoshimiya’s inner fortress. However...”

Ah, Reita thinks so too, huh? I have a long way to go, I thought lightheartedly.

“That means I can have Miori, right?”



I'd just heard a shocking statement come out of Reita's mouth. I did a double take in my surprise, but he appeared to be genuine.

"Huh? You like Miori?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm, she's really caught my eye lately. Plus, she talks to me often."

Huh? Then that means Miori's accomplished her goal! What the— Does that mean I didn't need to fuss over her side of things? Maybe we didn't even need the double date plan.

"So, your answer? Is that okay?"

"Uh, you don't have to ask for my permission... If anything, I'm very happy about it!"

Reita's eyes fixed on my bewildered expression. Finally, he relaxed and shrugged his shoulders. "You're Miori's childhood friend, so I asked just in case, get what I mean?"

"Yeah. But childhood friends are still just normal friends..."

This was an unexpected development, and my head was having trouble processing the new information. But I'd confirmed that Miori and Reita shared mutual feelings. Now all they had to do was get to know each other over time. *I guess this means Miori's gonna have her happy ending for sure! I'm really glad for her, I thought. As her fellow conspirator, naturally I want her love to bear fruit.*

"I'll cheer for you and Miori too," I told him.

"I'm glad to hear you say so. I was worried about that."

"What do you mean? Did you think I'd complain about it?" I asked with a laugh. *Of course not! Looks like Reita can be blind as a bat sometimes. That kinda gives me peace of mind.*

"Hmm, who knows?" He smiled thinly and patted me on the back. "I'm going to call Tatsuya back down from the roof. Homeroom is about to start," he said and left the room.

Now alone, I looked over at Hoshimiya and the others. All three girls were

staring at me. Nanase beckoned me over, so I obediently went to them.

“What is it, Nanase?” I asked.

“Oh my. Do I need a reason to call you over? We’re friends, right, Uta?” she questioned.

“Y-Yeah... We’re friends, so it’s fine,” Uta said in agreement.

I didn’t know what else to do but nod. Silence floated between us. *Umm, excuse me... Being under this awkward atmosphere in front of everyone is just way too grueling! I want to do something that’ll get Uta back to her normal self. If I don’t, I’m going to be infected by her vibes too.*

“U-Ummm... Do you want to talk about our plans for summer break?” I suggested.

“O-Oh, right! We thought it’d be nice to go to the mountains or the sea!” Uta piped up. We’d somehow started a normal conversation, albeit a bit of a stilted one.

“Yeah. Personally, I’d prefer going to the sea,” I replied.

“Oooh, the sea sounds good! I haven’t gone swimming in a long time either!”

Our conversation carried on, and we slowly regained our normal communication abilities. Right as the discussion started to take off, our homeroom teacher entered the room.

“Hey, all of you, get to your seats. I don’t know what you’re so excited about, but finals begin next week. If you’ve got time to jabber, then study up instead!”

Everyone grumbled at our teacher’s spiel. The buzz in the room was instantly doused. I was also eager for our vacation to come, but that had forced me back to reality. *I bet everyone has high expectations for me because I scored first place during the midterms...*

When I was about to return to my seat, Hoshimiya called out to me. “Natsuki-kun.”

I turned in her direction, but she didn’t say anything. I could tell she was hesitating over what to say.

“I want to go to the ocean too,” she finally said before heading to her own seat.

“C-Cool...”

I wonder if there was something else she wanted to say? I didn’t have time to ponder, though. I hurried back to my own seat. Once homeroom ended, our teacher left us to our first period, math. Another boring day of classes began.

The rainy season ended, and summer kicked off. It was generally considered to be the season of youth (according to my research). And of course I had no intention of letting my summer end uneventfully like it had the first time!

Finally, my glorious summer vacation with all the free time in the world was coming. To the mountains, to the sea, to fireworks displays—I could think of countless events full of youthful vigor. I hadn’t decided what I’d do yet, but I had confidence that it would be an absolute blast. After all, I had friends to spend my days with. They were all coloring my life with vibrant colors.

This summer would never come again—and I was sure it would be an unforgettable one.

End of Volume 2

Afterword

I have always had a difficult time understanding the subtleties of people's hearts. I regarded myself as a highly interesting person and held little curiosity for others. Because of that, when I write stories, I have trouble grasping the characters. What is this character's personality like? As the story unfolds, how do they feel? What do they think? How do they change? I'm always probing for answers and trying to get to know my characters as I write.

If you feel that my characters are alive and breathing in this story, even if only a little bit, then that would be my greatest fortune as an author.

Long time no see. I'm Amamiya Kazuki.

Haibara's Teenage New Game+ won the 2020 HJ Novel Overall Best of the Year Grand Prize. That is a huge honor, and I'm over the moon about it. In commemoration for receiving the reward, HJ Bunko released a promotional video for this work on their official Twitter, Youtube channel, and *Haibara's* home page! If you haven't seen it yet, then please check it out.

Now then, volume two was a story about the rainy season with the focus on Uta and Miori. I probably shouldn't put it like this, but in retrospect, it wasn't a story with a significant problem. The same could be said for volume one. However, even though a problem may feel like it was nothing much in hindsight—and perhaps it'll even become a story where those involved will laugh about it as they drink together—I believe they were seriously agonizing over the issue at the time.

Students seem to think high school life and the scenery they can see with their own two eyes make up the entire world. Viewing youth from this perspective brings out the real charm in teenage rom-coms.

Now, it's time for acknowledgments. To my manager, N-san, I'm very sorry that my progress is always a last-minute endeavor... Next, I'd like to thank the illustrator, Gin-san, for the wonderful illustrations in this volume as well. Personally, I'm super into the illustration of Miori in the beginning of the light

novel. She's so cute. She was so adorable that I saved the image around five times.

And once again, thank you for picking up this book and reading it. In this world teeming with fascinating stories, I am elated that you chose to read through this one until the very end.

I have good news: it's been confirmed that we'll release a third volume for this series. Woo hoo! Please look forward to a summer that will never come again.

Also, volume two of *Eiyuu to Majo no Tensei Rabu-Kome (The Hero and the Witch's Reincarnation Rom-Com)*, Kodansha Light Novels, Japan only) will be published soon. If it tickles your fancy, then I'd be very happy if you read that as well.

I'm running out of topics, so I'll chat about recent happenings now. The publication schedule of both of my series overlapped, so I've been dead for a while, but I've revived a little as of late.

Day after day, *Valorant* calls for us. The world championship was fire! As someone who has followed the competitive FPS scene for a long time, I was so moved by the series that I cried my heart out.

I've also been reading light novels and web novels at my own slow pace. The hottest web novel as of late is *Dai Nana Maouji Jirubagiasu no Maou Keikoku Ki (Seventh Demon Prince Jilbagias, The Demon Kingdom Destroyer)*, Japan only). It's legit some good stuff. I highly recommend it.

I usually report what's going on in my life like this on my Twitter, so if you're interested please check me out @amamiya5235. I tweet about silly things, so thanks in advance!

Written on the final day of April in a café in Yokohama, while listening to BUMP OF CHICKEN's "Sharin no Uta."

An anime-style illustration of a boy and a girl in school uniforms. The boy, Haibara, is on the right, looking down at the girl, Miori. Miori is on the left, looking up at him. She is adjusting his red tie. In the background, two other girls are visible, one of whom is Miori's friend. The scene is set outdoors with a blurred background.

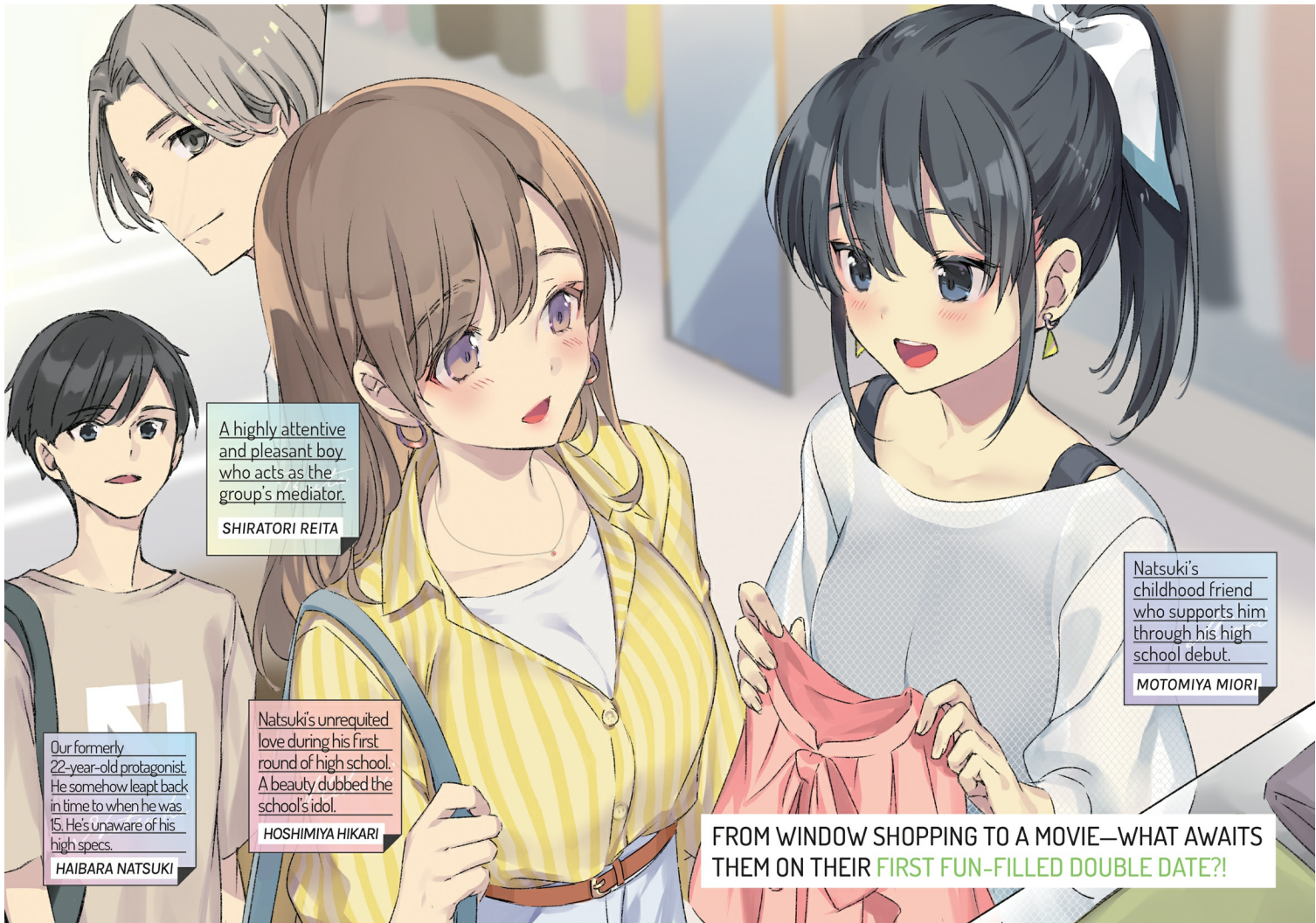
“Stay still.”

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+

Her tone left me no room to say yes or no. Miori fixed my tie without waiting for my permission. It wasn't a good idea to disobey her when she used that tone, so I obediently stayed still and let her fix it.

Our height difference is really apparent when she's this close. Miori was taller than me when we were kids.



A highly attentive and pleasant boy who acts as the group's mediator.

SHIRATORI REITA

Our formerly 22-year-old protagonist. He somehow leapt back in time to when he was 15. He's unaware of his high specs.

HAIBARA NATSUKI

Natsuki's unrequited love during his first round of high school. A beauty dubbed the school's idol.

HOSHIMIYA HIKARI

Natsuki's childhood friend who supports him through his high school debut.

MOTOMIYA MIORI

FROM WINDOW SHOPPING TO A MOVIE—WHAT AWAITS THEM ON THEIR FIRST FUN-FILLED DOUBLE DATE?!



“Uh, um... Err,
m-morning?”

An energetic and
cheerful girl who
loves basketball.
The group's *Uta*
mood maker.

SAKURA UTA

My so-called mental clarity was brittle and crumbled as soon as I saw her.

She wore a red yukata. Blooming against the striking red cloth were flowers of all different colors. Her short hair had been loosely braided, and a large flower accessory was pinned to one side. Uta usually kept her appearance simple, but today she was dressed to impress with her cuteness on full display.

She glanced restlessly around. When her gaze found me, she waved in a reserved manner.

Bonus Short Stories

After School with Sakura Uta

One day after school when I didn't have work or other plans, for no particular reason, I stood on top of the roof and gazed out at the view of the town while listening to music. No, strictly speaking, there *was* a reason, but it was merely because that felt like a youthful thing to do. Perhaps I'd watched too much high school life anime. I did it because I had wanted to try it, but in reality, I wasn't getting much of a kick out of the experience, so I was about to head home. People tend to behave bizarrely when they have too much time on their hands.

"Hyah!"

"Oofwah?!" An extremely pitiful sound escaped from my lips as someone suddenly smacked me on the back. Flustered, I turned around to see a certain somebody beaming at me, full of pride over having caught me off guard.

"Ah ha ha! C'mon, you get surprised way too easily!"

"I didn't notice you because I was listening to music," I replied as I took out my earphones.

Uta's eyes trained onto them. "Oh? Whatcha listening to?" I showed her my phone screen, and she instantly lit up with enthusiasm as she exclaimed, "Oooh! BUMP's 'Route 66'! Natsu, you know your stuff!"

Excited, she nudged me with her shoulder. *Um, you're way too close, you know?!* My heart pounded from the physical contact, but Uta didn't seem to notice and began scrolling through my phone.

"Oho! Natsu, I like your playlist! You've got great taste in music! Ah, you've got Ellegarden too. Very nice!"

Heh, I know, right? I especially like Elle's 'Kaze no Hi.' I used to only like cool and edgy songs, but recently I've been into mellow, positive music too... Hold on, now is not the time to be nodding away!

“Hey! Don’t edit my playlist without permission,” I yelled.

“Heh heh heh! I added a few of my recs!”

I checked my personal playlist, and sure enough, a few songs I hadn’t heard of had been added to it.

“We’ve got the same taste in music, so I’m sure you’ll like these too!” she said with confidence.

“Hmm... All right, I’ll give them a try.” I put my earphones back in and casually tapped play.

“I wanna listen too!”

Uta snatched one of my earphones out and put it in her own ear. She sidled up close, and I could feel her arm against mine. My earphones weren’t wireless (well, the wireless kind didn’t exist yet at this point in time), so due to the length of the cord, we were practically glued together.

O-Oh the nerves... I’m amazed Uta can be so nonchalant, I thought as I glanced at her face out of the corner of my eye. Contrary to my expectations, she was bright red. *So you are pushing yourself!* I screamed internally. My face was also crimson though, so I didn’t call her out. And so, the deep bass of rock began playing in one ear.

No one else was on top of the roof. The two of us leaned against the fence and drew close to each other. I wondered what we were doing there, almost cuddling together, but I honestly didn’t want to move away.

Our hair fluttered in the breeze, and an aggressive guitar phrase assailed us. Uta swayed in rhythm with the song; she was grooving out hard. The song ended, and I wondered why I hadn’t heard of it before.

She took the earphone out and asked, “Wasn’t it good?”

I nodded. *We really do share similar taste in music. Thanks! I’ll have to confer with you more often.* “I’ll listen to the rest later.”

“You’ll definitely vibe with them too! They’re all my top recs!” Uta said with a bright smile. She blinked a few times and then asked, “Anyway, why were you listening to music on the roof?” She sounded hesitant, as if it was a bit too late

to be asking.

I didn't want to tell her that I'd done it to experience youth. Desperate, I blurted out, "Uh, I just kinda felt like it?"

She pushed my shoulder. "What kinda answer is that? Spit out the truth!"

"That aside, what about you, Uta? Shouldn't you be at practice?" I asked after a moment, blatantly avoiding the topic.

She promptly answered, "Today's a rest day! We get two or three days off every month."

"Really? I didn't know that," I replied. *Makes sense. There's no such thing as a club without any break days.* Curious, I returned Uta's earlier question to her.

"Still...why'd you come up to the roof?"

For some reason, her cheeks flushed, and she turned away with a huff. "I just felt like it."

"Huh?"

"You just felt like coming up here too, right?! So I just felt like it too!" Uta frantically tried to defend her answer. I shot her a baffled look until she finally turned back and locked eyes with me. "A-Anyway, I'm going home! Bye-bye!" With that, she whisked through the door and disappeared like a sudden passing gale.

What the heck was that about?

Fangirl-Mode Nanase Yuino

I had work after school today, so once I got through another boring day of class, I made my way down the road that led from our school to the station. The cherry blossom trees lining the street were a familiar sight now as I headed towards the station where Café Mares was located.

Nanase, who was walking alongside me, asked, "Do you mind if we make a small detour?" She pointed at a CD shop ahead of us.

"Sure. We've got time before our shift starts." I checked my phone. It was just

past five. We had almost an hour until we had to clock in for work at six. And as you may have already realized by the fact that we'd walked together this far, yes, Nanase had work today as well. "Is there something you want to buy?"

"My oshi's CD was released today," she replied.

As soon as we entered the store, our surroundings suddenly became noisy. Part of it was because many other students like us were shopping inside, but it was mostly due to the music being played from various sections of the shop.

I don't mind such a chaotic clamor. Actually, I kinda missed this. I used to spend what little cash I had on my favorite bands' albums. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough to splurge whenever they released any singles.

While I lost myself in sentimental reminiscence, Nanase briskly advanced through the store. Her confident stride took her feet to a corner dedicated to an extremely popular girl group, Anogatsu55. *Yeah, I had a feeling it was for an idol group.*

"Wonderful, they still have some." She gleefully picked up a CD that had "New Release" written on it.

Uh, this isn't the kind of group where you need to worry about whether they're sold out or not. Look, there must be hundreds of CDs here. The album just got released, and the store stocked up on this many copies? That's some impressive popularity!

"Hmm... How many should I buy?" Nanase wondered with a solemn expression as she scooped up a few more CDs.

"Don't people normally just buy one?" I asked, somewhat taken aback.

She shot back with a powerful rebuttal. "Normally I'd just buy one to listen to and one for my collection, but this time each CD comes with a lottery ticket for their handshake event. Which means the more I buy, the higher chance I have of winning. I'm definitely going to meet Mayoi-chan and shake her hand!"

I could feel an intense, bloodcurdling determination radiating off of her. *You normally buy two copies? That's a legit idol fan for ya.* "You're just a high schooler. I think you should refrain from straining your wallet too much," I said, trying to sound reasonable.

“Urgh.” She turned to me, eyes filled with sad disappointment.

Hey, even if you look at me like that, what am I supposed to... It's so cute. Please, stop! Argh, you're too adorable!

“I'll make do with two copies this time,” Nanase murmured tearfully.

I've never heard her voice tremble like that before... Oh, fine! I smiled wryly and picked up a copy of the CD she was holding. “How about this? I'll buy one too, and you can have my lottery ticket.”

“R-Really?” Her face instantly lit up.

Wow! The only time she's easy to read is when she's talking about idols. “Yeah. I'm curious about this group anyway since you're so into them. I'll give them a listen.”

I believed that trying your friends' hobbies was essential, and it was a good way to get closer. We'd have more topics to talk about, and it would be easier to initiate conversations this way. Plus, I genuinely enjoyed music.

“Thanks, Haibara-kun,” Nanase said as she beamed at me happily.

Defeated by the immense destructive force behind her beautiful smile, I hastily changed the subject. “S-So, Nanase, which one's your oshi? You said her name was Mayoi-chan?”

“Yes! She's the second one from the right.”

I directed my gaze to the poster of the group and followed her finger. “Huh, that's Mayoi-chan?”

“Isn't she cute?”

After a beat, I said, “Yeah, she's cute.” *You know...she kinda looks like Hoshimiya. Of course she's cute!*

“Haibara-kun, I think you and I share similar preferences,” Nanase remarked enthusiastically.

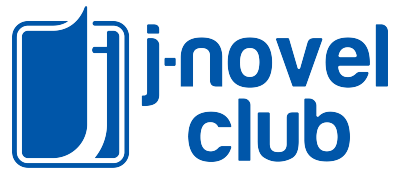
What's that supposed to mean?! I was confused, but she left me in suspense.

“Oh, their live concert was broadcasted! It slipped my mind for a moment, but Mayoi-chan was the center for it. She's been gaining popularity lately... Look!

It's uploaded now! See, isn't she super cute?"

"Uh-huh, very cute," I replied. *Both Mayoi-chan and Nanase when she's elated.*

For the record, because of how fired up Nanase had gotten, we were both late to work.



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Haibara's Teenage New Game+ Volume 2

by Kazuki Amamiya

Translated by Esther Sun Edited by Casey Pritt

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